A handful of red earth: dreams of rulers in Tabari's history of prophets and kings

Weststeijn, J.K.

Citation for published version (APA):
A HANDFUL OF RED EARTH & DREAMS of RULERS in TABARI’S HISTORY of PROPHETS and KINGS

JOHAN WESTSTEIJN

UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leiden Edition</th>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
<th>Anno Hejirae</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Volume</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>1–201</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>From the Creation to the Flood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>II</td>
<td>202–414</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>Prophets and Patriarchs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>III</td>
<td>414–597</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>The Children of Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>597–811</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>The Ancient Kingdoms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>V</td>
<td>813–1072</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>1073–1256</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Muḥammad at Mecca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VII</td>
<td>1256–1460</td>
<td>VII</td>
<td>The Foundation of the Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>1460–1654</td>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>The Victory of Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IX</td>
<td>1654–1837</td>
<td>IX</td>
<td>The Last Years of the Prophet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>1837–2015</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>The Conquest of Arabia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>XI</td>
<td>2016–2212</td>
<td>XI</td>
<td>The Challenge to the Empires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>XII</td>
<td>2212–2418</td>
<td>XII</td>
<td>The Battle of al-Qādisiyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>XIII</td>
<td>2419–2633</td>
<td>XIII</td>
<td>The Conquest of Iraq, Southwestern Persia, and Egypt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>XIV</td>
<td>2634–2798</td>
<td>XIV</td>
<td>The Conquest of Iran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>XV</td>
<td>2799–3065</td>
<td>XV</td>
<td>The Crisis of the Early Caliphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>XVI</td>
<td>3066–3256</td>
<td>XVI</td>
<td>The Community Divided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>XVII</td>
<td>3256–3476</td>
<td>XVII</td>
<td>The First Civil War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1–216</td>
<td>XVIII</td>
<td>The Caliphate of Mu‘awiyah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>216–429</td>
<td>XIX</td>
<td>The Caliphate of Yazīd b. Mu‘awiyah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>429–642</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>The Victory of the Marwānids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>642–854</td>
<td>XXI</td>
<td>The Collapse of Sufyānid Authority and the Coming of the Marwānids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>854–1051</td>
<td>XXII</td>
<td>The Marwānid Restoration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1052–1281</td>
<td>XXIII</td>
<td>The Zenith of the Marwānid House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1281–1466</td>
<td>XXIV</td>
<td>The Empire in Transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1466–1667</td>
<td>XXV</td>
<td>The End of Expansion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1667–1890</td>
<td>XXVI</td>
<td>The Waning of the Umayyad Caliphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1890–2017</td>
<td>XXVII</td>
<td>The First Civil War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>II</td>
<td>1–216</td>
<td>XVIII</td>
<td>Between Civil Wars: The Caliphate of Mu‘awiyah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>216–429</td>
<td>XIX</td>
<td>The Caliphate of Yazīd b. Mu‘awiyah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>429–642</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>The Victory of the Marwānids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>642–854</td>
<td>XXI</td>
<td>The Collapse of Sufyānid Authority and the Coming of the Marwānids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>854–1051</td>
<td>XXII</td>
<td>The Marwānid Restoration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1052–1281</td>
<td>XXIII</td>
<td>The Zenith of the Marwānid House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1281–1466</td>
<td>XXIV</td>
<td>The Empire in Transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1466–1667</td>
<td>XXV</td>
<td>The End of Expansion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1667–1890</td>
<td>XXVI</td>
<td>The Waning of the Umayyad Caliphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1890–2017</td>
<td>XXVII</td>
<td>The First Civil War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>III</td>
<td>1–88</td>
<td>XXVIII</td>
<td>‘Abbāsid Authority Affirmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>88–319</td>
<td>XXIX</td>
<td>al-Mansūr and al-Mahdī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>319–544</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>The ‘Abbāsid Caliphate in Equilibrium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>544–764</td>
<td>XXXI</td>
<td>The War between Brothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>764–974</td>
<td>XXXII</td>
<td>The Reunification of the ‘Abbāsid Caliphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>975–1163</td>
<td>XXXIII</td>
<td>Storm and Stress along the Northern Frontiers of the ‘Abbāsid Caliphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1164–1329</td>
<td>XXXIV</td>
<td>Incipient Decline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1329–1501</td>
<td>XXXV</td>
<td>The Crisis of the ‘Abbāsid Caliphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1501–1712</td>
<td>XXXVI</td>
<td>The Revolt of the Zanj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1712–1936</td>
<td>XXXVII</td>
<td>The ‘Abbāsid Recovery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1936–2133</td>
<td>XXXVIII</td>
<td>The Return of the Caliphate to Baghdad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2133–2294</td>
<td>XXXIX</td>
<td>Biographies of the Prophet’s Companions and their Successors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2296–2561</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A HANDBUL OF RED EARTH
DREAMS OF RULERS IN TABARI’S HISTORY OF PROPHETS AND KINGS

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. D. C. van den Boom
ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties ingestelde
commissie, in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Aula der Universiteit
op donderdag 5 februari 2009, te 12:00 uur

door Johan Kees Weststeijn
geboren te Amsterdam
Promotiecommissie:

Promotores: prof. dr. M.A. Woidich en prof. dr. R. Kruk
Co-promotor: dr. A. Schippers
Overige leden: prof. dr. N.H. Abu Zayd
prof. dr. I.J.F. de Jong
prof. dr. H.N. Kennedy
dr. M.L.M van Berkel
dr. R.L.A. van Leeuwen

Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen

Met dank aan: Promovix™, Thijs Weststeijn & Marieke van den Doel, Tony Profesorando, Richard van Leeuwen, Martin van Loenen, Alex de Voogt en Robbert Woltering.
A HANDFUL OF RED EARTH
DREAMS OF RULERS IN TABARI’S HISTORY OF
PROPHETS AND KINGS

JOHAN WESTSTEIJN
# Table of Contents

**List of Illustrations & Tables**

vi

1 **Dreams, Historiography, and Narratology**

   Dreams in classical Islam
2
   Tabari’s Tārīkh and the history of early Islam
3
   Perceived qualities of the Tārīkh
5
   The first problem: style
7
   The second problem: editorial comment
8
   The third problem: relation with reality
11
   The fourth problem: authorship
12
   A vicious circle
14
   The way out provided by narratology
15
   The distinction between author and primary narrator
16
   Approaches of the Tārīkh as a literary text
19
   Dreams, historiography, and narratology
21
   Tabari’s Tārīkh and the Bible
27

2 **Tabari’s Tārīkh: History, Chronology, or Catalogue?**

   The meaning of the term ‘tārīkh’
34
   De Goeje’s Leiden edition
37
   Ibrāhīm’s Cairo edition
38
   The English translation
38
   The structure of the Tārīkh: A narratological analysis
39
   The author and his narrators
40
   Year chapters and their entries
42
   Obituary entries and regnal chapters
43
   The relation between key events and akhābār
46
   The reticent style of Tabari’s primary narrator
48
   Conventions of reticence
49
   What constitutes a story?
55
   Dreams and implicit storytelling
56

3 **Tyrant Dreamer vs. Abrahamic Interpreter**

   The ‘tyrant vs. interpreter’ dream
65
   Biblical material in the Tārīkh
71
   The biblical models
73
      *Pharaoh and Joseph*
73
      *Pharaoh and Moses*
74
      *Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel*
75
      *Herod and the wise men from the East*
77
   Reception in the Tārīkh
79
      *The king of Egypt and Joseph*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pharaoh and Moses</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabī’a b. Naṣr and Saṭīḥ and Shiqq</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kisrā Anāsharwān and Saṭīḥ</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heraclius and Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetition and change</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 THE CONFLICTING LEGACIES OF PROPHETS AND KINGS 107

- ‘Tyrant vs. Abrahamite’ motifs in the Islamic section 110
- Abbasid revolutionaries as biblical redeemers 111
- Abbasid caliphs as biblical tyrants 112
- Burdened by two biblical legacies 114
- Hārūn as Abrahamite redeemer 114
- Hārūn as blind tyrant 116
- Abbasid caliphs as tragic heroes 118
- Mūsā and Hārūn 118
- The struggle over the succession to al-Mahdī 119
- al-Mahdī’s dream 121
- The staff that grows leaves 122
- Caliphs and prophets 123
- A deceptive layer of objective reporting 126

5 A HANDFUL OF RED EARTH 129

- Hārūn’s dream within the structure of the Tārīkh 130
- The dismemberment of Bashīr 132
- The Prophet, Gabriel and al-Ḥusayn 135
- Hārūn and ‘Alī al-Riḍā 137
- Fratricide and civil war 138

6 THREE TRAGIC RULERS 141

- Foreshadowing, dramatic irony and tragedy 142
- al-Mahdī dreams of two staffs that grow leaves 144
- al-Rashīd dreams of a handful of red earth 146
- al-Amīn dreams his hat falls off 147
- Three tragic rulers 149

7 THE TĀRĪKH AS HISTORY: DREAMS AND IMPLICIT STORYTELLING 153

BIBLIOGRAPHY 163

ENGLISH SUMMARY 179

NEDERLANDSE SAMENVATTING 181
ILLUSTRATIONS


Joseph Pharao’s droom verklarende wert een opperheer in Egipten gestalt
Schut, Bijbelsche Historiën, 30.

Nebucadnezar gedroom hebbende wert van Daniel de droom en sijne uitlegginge verklaert
Schut, Bijbelsche Historiën, 154.

The Aywān or vaulted hall of the Sasanids or Taq-i Kisra (“Kisra’s Arch”) on the bank of the Tigris at al-Madā’in Photograph by Gertrude Bell, 1909, The Gertrude Bell Archive.

Nebucadnezar doet voor hem brengen eenige Israëlitise jongelinge van Konings zaede
Schut, Bijbelsche Historiën, 153.

De Wijzen wt oosten gekomen werden van Herodes neerstelij ondervraeght
Schut, Bijbelsche Historiën, II, 11.

TABLES

I: Edition-translation conversion table inside cover

II: Primary narrator speech in year chapter 193 44

III: Recurring expressions in the tyrant vs. interpreter dream episodes 68

IV: Recurring events in the confrontations between tyrants and Abrahaimites 99

V: Tyrants confront the prophets of their days & The Abbasid caliphs as successors to them both 106
Opgedragen aan
mijn paranimfen
Thijs Weststeijn en
Robbert Woltering
Dreams, Historiography, and Narratology

Historians and literary critics have often voiced their astonishment about the peculiar nature of one of the most important works of classical Islamic literature: The History of Prophets and Kings by al-Ṭabarī (839-923 AD). This text seems a fragmentary compilation in which the author’s intentions remain opaque.

This thesis will take on the scholarly challenges presented by Ta-bārī’s chronicle by using a specific method: narratology. In order to implement this method in a fruitful way, a selection of motifs from the chronicle is subjected to detailed close-reading. For a number of practical and theoretical reasons, this selection will focus on the dream reports in the chronicle; among them, the dreams of rulers take pride of place. As official classical Islamic historiography employs an unadorned style to report realistic events and generally refrains from the use of metaphor and the description of miracles, predictive dreams stand out as those rare moments when significant symbolism occurs.

The research thus demarcated finds itself at the crossroads of two larger scholarly debates. On the one hand, dreams play a major role in classical Islam; analyzing them brings with it specialized historical knowledge. On the other hand, there is a complex debate about the
nature of classical Arabic history writing and how to approach it from a historian’s or literary critic’s point of view.

After outlining the problems posed by these two debates, the aim of this first chapter will be twofold: to justify the methodology that will be adopted to confront the problems inherent to the study of classical Islamic historiography, and to explain the choice of motifs that will be studied: the focus on dream reports.

**DREAMS IN CLASSICAL ISLAM**

Among the written heritage of classical Islam there are very few texts that do not contain references to dreams. As dreams played a central part in various fields of Islamic theology and philosophy, such as prophetology, epistemology and psychology, many philosophical treatises devote a section to the phenomenon of experiencing while asleep.¹ Oneiromancy was reckoned by many as one of the orthodox Islamic sciences,² and a large number of handbooks for dream interpreters has been preserved.³ Poets wrote about meeting their beloved in dreams,⁴ and in almost all genres of prose narrative—historiography, biography, *belles-lettres* anthologies—we can find dream reports, where all types of characters, caliphs, saints, slave women, even animals, relate each other their dreams.⁵ As yet, no passage has been found where a classical Arabic author categorically denies the possibility that dreams can contain truthful messages. In short, dreams must have played an important role in classical Islam.

If we want to study the function dreams fulfilled in the worldview of pre-modern Muslims, the most promising genre to start with appears to

---

be historiographical narrative. In the case of the lyrical motif of meeting the beloved in dreams, scholars have raised the question whether this was not just one of the stock set of motifs poets recycled from the pre-Islamic period that had in later times lost most of their relevance to the world outside the text. The philosophical treatises are highly theoretical and intended for too specialized an audience as to be considered representative. For the oneirocritical handbooks, we lack context and do not know how and at what occasions they were used. The works of prose narrative, however, offer us dream reports in a non-dream context. They not only provide entire dreams, but also offer details such as the reaction of the dreamer, whom he relates it to and in what setting, the reaction of the interpreter, etc. Of the different narrative genres, historiography promises the best results, for here, contrary to biography and belles-lettres anthologies, the individual dream reports are embedded in a longer chronological sequence of reports that constitutes a larger narrative in itself. Finding out how dreams function as textual elements in these larger narratives will explain why they were used in such great numbers by classical Arabic authors. Eventually, this will disclose a tip of the veil of how dreams functioned in the world their texts refer to.

**Tabari’s Tārīkh and the History of Early Islam**

From the first three centuries of Islam dishearteningly little documentary evidence has been preserved. To comprehend the momentous events of this period, the life of Muhammad, the Arab conquest of the Middle East, the spread of Islam, Umayyad rule and the Abbasid revolution, we have to rely on literary works, such as medieval Arabic historiography. One of the earliest products of this genre that has come down to us in its complete form is the *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, by Abū Ja’far Muḥammad b. Jarīr b. Yazīd al-Ṭabarī (224-310/839-923). His *Tārīkh* is a universal history from Creation until the year 302 H. This work contains, in direct discourse, long quotations from the words of a large number of others than Abū Ja’far al-Ṭabarī, apparently earlier authors. When Tabari’s work appeared, it apparently had such impact that it eclipsed almost all that had been written before him in this field. Now that they had the *Tārīkh*, scribes no longer copied earlier historiographical works in their entirety. As a result, the works of earlier historians have not come down to us. All that remains of their works are

---

6 See Jacobi, pp. 50-64.
citations found in the works of Tabari and his contemporaries. From now on, Tabari’s version of the history of the first three centuries of Islam became the standard account for all later historians to follow. In the entry on ‘historiography’ from the Encyclopaedia of Islam, we read:

The historical works of the late 3rd/9th and early 4th/10th centuries represent the culmination of historical writing in early Islam in two respects. First, they synthesised a vast corpus of narratives which had been collected and put into circulation over the previous 200 years. Second, they defined the religious and political meaning of these narratives in a manner that later Muslims found nearly definitive for many centuries. The syntheses composed around the beginning of the 4th/10th century attained such prestige that few later historians made any effort to investigate anew the first 200 years of Islamic history; they were usually content to copy and abridge the “classical” syntheses, in particular the vast chronicle of Abū Ḥajfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). As a result, most of the older sources ceased to be copied or read in any systematic way.7

Because Tabari’s Tārīkh replaced the earlier works, it contains reports on the fundamental events of the first three centuries of Islam that can be found nowhere else. Modern historians who study early Islam simply cannot do without it: not only is the Tārīkh an indispensable source for historical reconstruction of the course of events from the first three centuries; it is also an indispensable source for those who want to understand pre-modern Islamic history writing. To reconstruct the early stages of Arabic historiography, we have to study the citations of earlier authors in Tabari’s text, as these are all that remain of this earlier phase. To fully understand later Arabo-Islamic historiography, we need to take account of the decisive influence exercised on this tradition by Tabari’s work.

As a synthesis of earlier history writing and a model for later historiography, Tabari’s text can rightly be seen as representative of an entire tradition. Its scope and influence make it the crown achievement of Arabic historiography, and thereby one of the major cultural artefacts of Islamic civilization, one of the classics. At the same time, some of the problems surrounding early Islamic historiography—which will be dealt with in more detail below—find their most radical expression in Tabari’s Tārīkh. The Tārīkh is not only the crown text of Islamic historiography, but also one of its most problematic achievements. Thus, a better understanding of Tabari’s Tārīkh will facilitate understanding of a large portion of pre-modern Islamic historiography.

7 R. S. Humphreys, ‘Ta’rikh’, EI².
One of the factors that must have contributed to the Tārīkh’s popularity among modern historians is that it is not only indispensable to reconstruct the events of early Islam and the contents of early historiography, but that it also gives the reader the impression to be a reliable source for such reconstruction. In the absence of truly documentary evidence—inscriptions, archives, archaeological remains—Tabari’s Tārīkh appears the next best thing, an archive of documentary evidence in its own right. There are four formal aspects of the Tārīkh that contribute to this impression of the text as a highly reliable, almost documentary source: the realistic content; the dry style; Tabari’s method of quoting his sources; and last but not least, the scope of the work that seems to leave nothing out.

The events described in the Tārīkh appear credible as they are for the most part realistic events. Events of a fantastic nature, such as magic, miracles, superhuman powers, monsters, and animals that can speak are barely found in the Tārīkh. What is more, in the presentation of these events, Tabari and the sources he quotes use a dry, fact-oriented style, which means no flowery language and no metaphor. This makes Tabari and his sources seem to be interested in the efficient, matter-of-fact reporting of what actually happened, rather than in formal embellishment or the invention of a pleasing narrative.

A third quality that contributes to the impression of documentary reliability is that most of the text consists of direct quotations of earlier sources, many of whom appear as eyewitnesses to the events they describe. Tabari meticulously states the provenance of these sources: every quotation is preceded by an isnād, an often highly detailed list of transmitters. The compiler of the Tārīkh has taken the effort of collecting different accounts of the same event. Even if such accounts only vary in detail, he assiduously quotes them all, one after another. Moreover, the compiler allows these sources to speak for themselves; he barely uses his own voice. All this leads to the impression that Tabari is more interested in preserving the exact wording of his sources for posterity than in pressing his own agenda, or in tendentiously manipulating the historical record to grind his own religious or political axe.

Finally, the wide scope of the work (almost eight thousand pages in the Leiden edition) allows for a highly detailed coverage of events, that results in, among other things, a plethora of personal names of historical actors and of transmitters of reports. This gives the impression of an exhaustive, comprehensive covering of the period under review, especially of the period from the rise of Islam until the author’s own time.

In sum, the Tārīkh’s style gives rise to two impressions. Firstly, Tabari’s text appears as a highly reliable repository of carefully quoted earlier texts, as if it were the transcript of an archive of documents. Secondly, it appears as if these earlier sources contained in the Tārīkh can be used unconditionally for the reconstruction of the actual course of events. These two impressions related to the Tārīkh’s formal aspects suggest modern scholars that the text can solve two problems:

1. The fact that earlier works of classical Islamic history writing have not survived seems less problematic since large sections of these texts appear to have been reliably preserved in the Tārīkh.
2. The fact that the Tārīkh was only composed in the second part of the third century H, i.e. hundreds of years after many of the events it describes, seems unproblematic since the text appears to have preserved the reports of eyewitnesses to these events in a reliable manner.

That this view towards Tabari’s ideas of history writing has been accepted by many modern scholars may be concluded from the entry devoted to him in the Encyclopaedia of Islam:

The great virtues of his History and Commentary are that they form the most extensive of extant early works of Islamic scholarship and that they preserve for us the greatest array of citations from lost sources. They thus furnish modern scholarship with the richest and most detailed sources for the political history of the early caliphate...Al-Ṭabarī gave parallel accounts from all these last authorities of earlier Islamic times, rather than attempting to furnish a conflated, connected story of historical events, even when the parallel accounts could not easily be harmonised or were even contradictory. His aim was, rather, to present the evidence for the course of the early Islamic history of the lands between Egypt and the far eastern fringes of the Iranian world so that others could evaluate it in a more critical fashion should they so wish.  

However, with classical Islamic historiography, things are not as unambiguous as presented in this entry. Scholars studying the History of Prophets and Kings are confronted with four interrelated problems: the work’s fragmentary style; the absence of editorial comments; the text’s inherently contradictory nature, which inspires questions about the relation between text and historical fact; and the issue of authorship: the origin of the reports and the ultimate responsibility for their compilation.

The first problem: style

While modern readers were impressed by the scope of Tabari’s work, his attention to detail and his meticulous statements on the provenance of his sources, they were at the same time irritated by his text. A modern ideal of history writing holds that the author does more than just gluing his sources one after the other, or simply presenting the bare sources he has collected, or merely summing up a list of past events. According to this ideal, a writer of history should provide an analysis of his materials. He is expected to resolve contradictions between his sources, to highlight those events that are more important than others, and to tie individual events together by explaining relations of cause and effect. Ideally, he should situate these events in a larger pattern that is supposed to govern the course of history. Finally, we expect him to present these findings in the form of a continuous, focussed and coherent narrative. To quote John Burrow’s A History of Histories (2008):

History as a genre...characteristically involves extended narrative, relevant circumstantial detail, and thematic coherence; the recording of facts is dictated by thematic, dramatic and explanatory considerations, rather than just chronological juxtaposition.\(^{11}\)

To many modern readers, Tabari’s work did not meet their expectations of what history writing should be like. In the first place, most scholars have found the Tārīkh uneasy to read because it seems to lack a major theme. As Stephen Humphreys puts it in his Islamic History, Tabari failed to ‘portray (to follow Aristotle’s language) a single action, a unified story leading up to a clear dramatic resolution’.\(^{12}\) We may quote Hum-


phrey’s influential judgement in more detail when he writes that the authors of historiographical works such as Tabari’s Tārikh never intervene in the narrative to explain its overall significance.

These vast compilations make no effort to construct a unified narrative of events. On the contrary, they consist of a series of discrete reports (Ar. ḥadīth, pl. ḥadīth) varying in length from a line to several pages. These ḥadīth are not linked by a narrative thread; they are simply juxtaposed end to end, each being marked off from the others by its own isnād. A compiler might select several reports pertaining to a given event, and these could variously repeat, overlap, or contradict one another...None of these historians...ever intervenes in the narrative to explain its overall significance or to pass judgment on the actors.¹³

Not only was the Tārikh perceived to lack a unifying narrative thread, the fact that slightly different reports describing the same event are included one after the other, each one of them preceded by a tedious isnād, or a list of transmitters, leads to disturbing interruptions, repetitions and contradictions.

The second problem: editorial comment

In the eyes of most modern readers, Tabari not only failed to provide a single, uninterrupted story line, but he also failed to provide comment on events, on his sources and to solve the contradictions between conflicting accounts. At first view, the compiler of the Tārikh simply sums up events and quotes eyewitness reports; he does not in his own voice comment on the possible importance of events or their relationship to each other. In the words of Tayeb el-Hibri: ‘Modern historians have often lamented the annalistic style of the early Islamic chronicles, which do not show the chronicle commenting on the events being recounted, and Tabari has always stood as the prime example of this silence.’¹⁴

When quoting different accounts of the same events, Tabari fails to express his preference for one of these accounts over the others. Conflicting versions are simply juxtaposed, contradictions are not resolved. The absence of an explicit authorial voice has presented serious interpretative problems relative to Tabari’s expected role as an historian. The lack of a single, uninterrupted story-line just makes the text a hard read. Those who wished to use his Tārikh to reconstruct past events,

¹³ Humphreys, ‘Tārikh’.
however, were in need of the author’s explicit viewpoint in order to be able to separate reliable reports and transmitters from unreliable ones.

The fact that the *Tārīkh* fails to comply with much of what a modern audience expects from a proper piece of history writing, has led to three different assumptions about its author. First, there is the radical assumption, expressed by Jacob Lassner for instance, that the *Tārīkh* never had a real author: it was a fairly random collection of quotations from earlier works, compiled by a group of unorganized scribes:

The greatest chronicles describing early ‘Abbāsid history [the reference is to Ṭabarī a.o.] are composite works that do not bear the clear stamp of an acknowledged author. Compiled from accounts drawn from earlier treatises, these impressive texts give the impression of having been assembled by an editor supported by numerous assistants.\(^\text{15}\)

A second group of scholars maintains that, even if the *Tārīkh* was the work of a single individual who collected, selected and compiled all sources on his own, this ‘author’ was nothing more than an unimaginative bookkeeper with no literary aspirations and no personal opinion on the sources he quoted or on the events they speak about. Humphreys, for instance, labels Tabari as ‘this most self-effacing and impersonal of Muslim historians’ and speaks of ‘the way Tabari has traditionally been viewed in both Muslim and Western scholarship—as an exceedingly industrious, thorough, honest drudge (everyone’s favorite B+ good student)’.\(^\text{16}\) Elsewhere, he writes:

The reluctance of men like al-Ṭabarī to speak in their own voice, to state explicitly the sense and significance of the materials which they have so laboriously assembled, has been an acute problem for many an Orientalist. In some cases it has even led to the conclusion that these scholars did not think at all, that they were in fact mere compilers.\(^\text{17}\)

In a textbook for students of classical Arabic literature, Ilse Lichtenstadder tries to defend the perceived absence of editorial comment in the *Tārīkh* by turning it into a virtue. She argues that it was Tabari’s conscious choice to bracket his own judgement and leave the interpretation of events to his readers:


\(^\text{17}\) Humphreys, *Islamic History*, pp. 73-4.
He held back his own judgement in order not to prejudge his sources. Indeed, by registering impartially all available evidence, al-Ṭabarī showed his awareness that even the smallest detail—particularly in controversial issues—might become a factor in bringing out the truth. He himself, however, abstained from pre-judgement; it is as if he were saying to his readers: “I have collected for you all the evidence—now you be the judge as to how it really came to pass.”

A third outlook towards the author of the Tārīkh, that was first proposed by Marshall Hodgson in 1961 and adopted again by Stefan Leder in the early 1990s, has gained ground during the last decade. Hodgson formulates the view that compilers like Tabari did have a strong religio-political opinion on past events, but that they presented this opinion in an implicit, indirect way. Most of the proponents of this point of view have focussed on the Rāshidūn section of Tabari’s Tārīkh, and argue that Tabari indirectly put forward his opinion by arranging his material in a certain order. Of course, the assumption that Tabari presented his opinions indirectly is controversial: one question it raises is why Tabari, if he truly had an opinion on past events and wished to communicate it, preferred implicit over explicit statements. It is to this question, however, that the scholars adhering to this point of view have failed to provide a satisfying answer.

18 Ilse Lichtenstadter, Introduction to Classical Arabic Literature, with Selections from Representative Works in English Translation (New York: Twayne, 1974), 54.
In *Les Arabes et l’appropriation de l’histoire* (2004), Abdessalem Cheddadi gives voice to the mixture of admiration and irritation felt by modern scholars when they are confronted with classical Islamic historiography:

L’historiographie arabo-musulmane a toujours suscité chez les chercheurs modernes des sentiments mêlés…L’importance qu’elle accorde à la chronologie, le sens de l’histoire qui s’y exprime, l’exactitude qu’elle sait parfois déployer dans la relation des faits, …la masse énorme des faits qu’elle se montre capable de drainer sont autant de facteurs qui la rapprochent indubitablement de la conception que nous nous faisons de l’histoire. Mais l’organisation de l’œuvre avec la fragmentation du récit et la simple juxtaposition des informations, la sécheresse du style, une prosopographie envahissante, …l’encombrant et souvent inutile usage des chaînes de garants (*isnād*) dressent entre elle et nous une barrière d’étrangeté et d’incompréhension.  

We will return at various moments to the scholarly challenge posed by the ‘barrier of strangeness’ resulting from the anomalous style of the *Tārīkh* and the lack of explicit editorial comment by its compiler Tabari. The problems relative to the work’s style and lack of editorial comment appear difficult to solve because they are intertwined with two other questions, relating to the world outside the text. How reliable, after all, are the reports quoted in the *Tārīkh* for a reconstruction of the actual course of events? Who should be considered as the author(s) of these reports?

The third problem: the reports in relation to reality

Modern historians of early Islam have wished to establish the reliability of the reports quoted by Tabari as historical documentation. Although they seem to provide fairly trustworthy coverage of real events, they cannot be taken at face value for historical reconstruction for the simple reason that many accounts of the same event flatly contradict each other. In his *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, Fred Donner writes:

Even a quick reading of some of the main literary sources for Islamic origins—particularly narratives on this theme—reveals internal complexities that give pause to the serious researcher. Chronological discrepancies and absurdities

---

abound, as do flat contradictions in the meaning of events or even, less frequently, on their fundamental course.\textsuperscript{22}

When Tabari’s quotes conflicting eyewitness reports of the same event, it is virtually impossible to establish which one of them provides the account that is closest to historical fact. Due to the paucity of documentary evidence about classical Islam, no external sources can help us to separate fact from fiction and to decide which version is the most reliable.

It appears that we can only solve this third problem, the reports’ relation to reality, if we first solve the two previous problems of style and editorial comment. Due to the text’s style, more similar to the transcript of an archive of documents than to a story, the contents of the Tārīkh look like facts rather than fictions. To what extent can we trust this appearance if the sources quoted are contradictory and consequently many of them must be false? Is the factual, realistic style just a façade of make-belief? Here the work’s lack of editorial comment is felt: Tabari must have known some of his transmitters personally and had read their works in their entirety, but he never says which account or what transmitter he believes to be the most reliable. Nor does he state the selection criteria he used to include quotations. The question arises whether he included everything he could lay his hand on or only those accounts of which he judged the contents and transmitters reliable.

Finally, to decide which reports are factual and which not, it seems we first need to establish with certainty in what period they were created and when they found the form in which they appear in the Tārīkh. Once we know, for example, that a report about Muhammad was created by someone living many years after the Prophet’s death, or even by Tabari himself, we have more grounds to denounce it as fiction than if we know that it was created by an actual eyewitness.

The fourth problem: authorship

The presence of variant accounts of the same events raises more questions than just documentary reliability. The different versions must either be distortions of the truth by biased eyewitnesses with an axe to grind, or rewritings of the reliable original by partisan transmitters or by the final compiler. They may also be outright inventions produced

by someone somewhere along this scale. In fact, we do not know what
changes occurred during the process of transmission, nor do we know
whether Tabari really quoted his sources verbatim. Humphreys explains
in his *Islamic History*:

Presumably, most of our accounts concerning the first six or seven decades of
Islam originated as oral statements, and were only committed to writing at some
later point. But...scholars do not agree as to the time of when such oral accounts
began to be systematically collected and written down. Nor is it likely that once
a given *khabar* was committed to writing, it would remain fixed in that form
forever after...In brief, the way in which the ancient historical tradition was
recorded and transmitted left manifold sins of omission and commission.23

To understand why eyewitnesses or transmitters distorted or embellished the truth, we would like to know more about them as authors:
What politico-religious factions did they belong to? Against the backdrop of what events did they write? What were their aesthetic criteria? Which rules of transmission did they adhere to?

We do not know at what moment the reports quoted in the *Tārīkh*
found their final form. Although most reports are preceded by a chain
of transmission which goes back to a contemporary witness, we are not
sure how much faith to put in such *isnāds*. It is, therefore, unclear who
should be considered as the authors of these reports: the witness, one of
the transmitters, or the compiler Tabari. Even if we assume that Tabari
did change nothing to the words of his sources, it remains unclear
whether we should consider the reports he quotes as reflecting his own
authorial opinion.

This fourth problem of authorship boils down to these questions:
When, how, why and by whom were Tabari’s sources actually written?
What parts of the *Tārīkh* should we attribute to Tabari and what parts to
the authors of his sources? Which parts reflect whose opinion? As
Tabari’s sources, oral or written, have not been preserved in their
original form, there are again no external arguments to answer these
questions. We have to look for clues in the text of the *Tārīkh* itself: we
can only solve the problem of authorship if we first solve the problem of
editorial comment. Apparently, to locate those parts that reflect Tabari’s
opinion, we first have to understand the way Tabari commented on his
materials.

23 Humphreys, *Islamic History*, p. 86.
A vicious circle

We see that the problems we want to solve in this thesis, style and editorial comment, are tightly interrelated with two other problems, relation with reality and authorship. To understand the strange style of the Tārīkh and find out why it does not comply with our expectations of historiographical narrative, it seems we first need to differentiate the parts of the work that are reportage of actual events from the parts that are fiction. Likewise, to understand the work’s structure it seems we first have to understand whether Tabari slavishly copied his textual format from his predecessors or whether it was his original creation. In the case of the problem of editorial comment, it seems we can only understand whether and how Tabari judged his sources if we can ascertain whether he copied his sources verbatim. Apparently, the questions relative to style and editorial comment can only be answered if the problems of documentary reliability and authorship are resolved first.

Unsurprisingly, this brings us to a vicious circle. As explained above, to decide which parts of the Tārīkh are reliable historical documentation, we have to better understand who wrote these parts (the problem of authorship), whether the Tārīkh’s dry style is really a sign of documentary reliability (the problem of style) and whether Tabari deemed some of his sources more trustworthy than others (the problem of editorial comment). To make matters worse, it may be noted that we can only differentiate the parts of the Tārīkh that reflect the author’s vantage point from those that reflect the opinions of others when we fully understand the work’s style and the ratio behind the compilation process.

In sum, we can only solve problems of 1) style and 2) editorial comment if we solve the problems of 3) relation with reality and 4) authorship, but they in their turn can only be solved if we solve the problems of style and authorship first. This vicious cycle seems to lead to a scholarly dead end: in the words of Fred Donner, ‘this uncertainty about the Islamic sources has gradually undermined historians’ confidence in almost every aspect of the traditional view of Islamic origins.’\(^{24}\) As historical evidence from outside the text is lacking, the only way forward is to temporarily bracket all questions relative to the authorship of the reports quoted by Tabari and of their relation to reality. If we focus on the text as text, and try to find an explanation from inside the text for

\(^{24}\) Donner, p. 2.
its strange style and for the lack of an explicit authorial voice, we will
better understand Tabari’s work as a writer of history. Maybe this will
ultimately allow us to say more about the text’s relation to reality and
the authorship of its sources; then our findings will be valuable to
modern scholarship that envisions a reconstruction of early Islamic
history.

I do not need to spend many words on the fact that these findings
may have a wider impact than just Tabari’s work. Because of its
apparent incorporation of earlier works and its decisive influence on
later authors, the Tārīkh is representative of much of Arabo-Islamic
historiography. At the same time, it may well be the most radical ex-
pression of some of the problems surrounding early Islamic historio-
graphy. In addition, our conclusions may be relevant to other genres in
classical Arabic prose as well, that are similar to historiography or
otherwise indebted to it, such as geographical or prosopographical
works that are encyclopaedic in nature.

THE WAY OUT PROVIDED BY NARRATOLOGY

This thesis will try to find a way out of the problems posed by classical
Islamic historiography by looking at the Tārīkh as a self-contained
whole. It will do this using the specific method of narratology, the study
of storytelling techniques. From its inception, narratology has set as
one of it goals to disentangle the text from the person who produced it
and the reality it refers to. The method of narratology provides a
looking glass that, while focussing on the text itself, temporarily blocks
author and reality from view. In the words of Mieke Bal, a
narratological analysis ‘temporarily brackets both ends of the embed-
ding reality, the reality of the events “out there” and the reality of the...
reporter; for the duration of a prior analysis, the narratologist pre-
supposes that the narrative is structurally self-sufficient, hence
fictional.’\(^\text{25}\) Because narratology hands us concepts to analyze and
describe a text without touching upon reality and author, it provides us
a method to disentangle the complex of problems inherent to classical
Islamic historiography. Narratology helps us to disentangle the
problematic style and lack of editorial comment from questions relative
to documentary value and authorship.

\(^{25}\) Mieke Bal, Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative (Toronto: University of
Another goal of narratology has been to think and write about texts in concepts that are valueless and not cultural-specific. Although originally developed on the basis of the study of the modern European and American novel, narratology tries to provide terms that are universally applicable to the study of all types of narratives from all times and all places. This brings us to another argument to use narratology to deal with the Tārīkh: it helps us to approach a text that appears so foreign in an objective, unbiased way. It helps us to rise above the negative dismissal ‘this does not look like what we are used to’ and provides the terminology for a more constructive and positive description. Narratology hands us the tools to correctly approach the problem of style.

Many of the problems encountered by modern scholars who wished to interpret classical Arabic history writing arose from the neglect of distinctions that are obvious in narratology. First and foremost, narratology can help us to disentangle the problem of editorial comment from the problem of authorship because (by focussing on who narrates what) it sharply distinguishes between the author of a text and its various narrators. As this is an essential insight for the analysis that will be followed in the next chapters, we will devote some extra attention to it.

The distinction between author and primary narrator

From a narratological perspective, the most important aspect of any narrative text is the narrator. Because this narrator can quote characters who themselves tell stories (as, in fact, happens constantly in the Tārīkh when transmitters report to the narrator accounts they heard or when eyewitnesses relate events they witnessed) narratology makes a distinction between the primary narrator of a text and eventual secondary narrators that are quoted by this primary narrator.

To help readers understand the rhetorical effect of overtly fictional texts such as the novel, it is common practice to remind them that they should distinguish the primary narrator of this text from its author. This distinction is necessary because readers are inclined to assume automatically that the two are identical, that the primary narrator is the author. Readers often believe that the opinions put forward by the narrator are an expression of the author’s opinions. When the narrator is also the protagonist of the story he tells, readers tend to consider this

26 Bal, p. 19.
27 Bal, p. 18.
story as an autobiographical account of events which actually took place in the author’s life. A famous example in the history of literature demonstrating that one should not naively assume that author and narrator are identical is provided by the novel *Lolita*, where the author is called Vladimir Nabokov, while the narrator and protagonist who confesses his violation of a minor bears the name Humbert Humbert.

To avoid such confusions, narratology approaches the narrators of all texts, whether these texts are overtly fictional or claim to be factual such as historiography, as fictive personae created by the author. By the narratological definition, the *author* is a person of flesh and blood who exists in reality, whereas the *narrator* is a persona made on paper, only existing in the world of the text. Bal explains this distinction as follows:

> A narrative text is a text in which a narrative agent tells a story...It hardly needs mentioning that this agent is not the (biographical) author of the narrative...Rather, the writer withdraws and calls upon a fictitious spokesman, an agent technically known as the narrator.  

What makes things complicated, however, is that authors often consciously create the narrator of their text after their own likeness. The fictive narrator Humbert Humbert, for example, is a European literary scholar who migrated to the United States, exactly like his author Vladimir Nabokov. Writers, in other words, use the reader’s tendency to equate narrator with author for rhetorical effect. If the fictive narrator resembles a real-life author, this makes the narrator appear more lifelike and this will strengthen his story’s claim to truth. It also works the other way: the author can give his primary narrator qualities that he himself could not humanly possess, like absolute neutrality, omniscience, or the capacity to be in several places at the same time. As readers tend to equate narrator and author, the positive qualities of this narrator make the author look wiser, more reliable, and thus more persuasive.

Although the distinction between author and narrator was developed in order to better understand the convincing power of the fictional novel, it can also be highly useful for analyzing the rhetorical effects of other genres of narrative, such as historiography. Just like or maybe even more than authors of fiction, historians are highly concerned with persuading the reader that their narrative of past events is not just fantasy but a truthful account of what actually happened, and in casting themselves in the role of the most reliable conveyor of

---

information about the past. Here I argue that to understand the rhetorical effect of the Tārīkh, it is necessary to distinguish between Tabari, the flesh-and-blood author who also wrote a number of other works, and the primary narrator, a persona created by Tabari that only exists within the textual context of this chronicle.29

It should be noted here that the discussion about author versus narrator is not exactly the same as another discussion that also revolves around notions of ‘authorship’, but here in the sense of intellectual ownership: the debate about original creation versus plagiarism, and the questions raised in this debate such as which parts of the Tārīkh were created by Tabari, and which parts he copied from the works of other authors. Narratology considers the real-life person who produced the text in its present form as the one and only author, regardless of whether all of the text is his ‘original creation’ or whether he copied or edited samples from the works of others. Likewise, because narratology temporarily ignores the reality outside the text, it considers all narrators, primary as well as secondary, as fictional characters created by this author, even when such narrators bear the names of real life authors or other real life persons, such as Ibn Ishāq or Hārūn al-Rashīd.

From the perspective of narratology, both the primary and the secondary narrators are creations of the author Tabari, mouthpieces he uses to make his story more persuasive. Of course, this does not mean that a researcher who approaches the Tārīkh form a narratological point of view has to actually believe that all these narrators are merely figments of Tabari’s overheated imagination, that all chains of transmitters are fake, the reported events never took place, and there never really was a prophet called Muhammad to begin with.30 Narratologists simply state that it is not necessary to discern fact from fiction in order to assess the rhetorical effects of a text on its readers.

Until now, most modern readers of the Tārīkh have failed to take into account these analytical distinctions brought forward by narratology. They failed to distinguish clearly between the author Tabari and the primary narrator of his Tārīkh. Thus they assumed the words uttered by the primary narrator—and only these words—to be a straightforward

---

29 The Tārīkh itself also speaks against uncritical equation of Tabari with the main narrator, for this (anonymous) primary narrator sometimes quotes an informant, a secondary narrator who is called Abū Ja’far (i.e. al-Ṭabarī). See for example khabar nr. 193.1.1 from Table II, ‘Primary narrator speech in year chapter 193’, corresponding to Tabari, Tārīkh, III, p. 765.

rendition of Tabari’s opinion. Because they equated the author with the primary narrator, the paucity of primary narrator speech in this work (compared to the superabundance of secondary narrator speech) and the absence of comment in his words made them assume the Tārīkh had no real author. At the same time, they equated the secondary narrators with other authors than Tabari, and thus uncritically assumed that the words uttered by these secondary narrators were an accurate rendering of assumed texts created by real life predecessors, and reflecting the opinion of these earlier authors, not those of Tabari. They failed to take account of the possibility that Tabari uses these secondary narrators in the same way as he uses the primary narrator: to bring across his opinion indirectly.

As regards the debate about editorial comment, if the primary narrator does not comment on events or on the trustworthiness of the secondary narrators, this does not mean automatically that the author Tabari did not comment on events or on his sources.

Narratology only looks at the narrators of a text, while consciously ignoring the real life author and the question whether he and his transmitters faithfully recorded or manipulated their sources. This way, a narratological approach is able to steer clear of the complex discussion about authorship in the sense of the intellectual ownership of the different parts of the Tārīkh.

As Bal puts it, 'the distinction between author and narrator...helps to disentangle the different voices that speak in a text so as to make room for the reader's input in [assessing] the relative persuasiveness of those voices.' In other words, narratology allows us to draw meaningful conclusions about the effect of the Tārīkh on its readers while postponing the answer to questions of intellectual ownership. Ultimately, however, our findings will also be relevant to the world outside the text of the Tārīkh: they reveal something about the intentions of the flesh-and-blood author Tabari, about how he expected his audience to react, and how he and his public remembered the history of Early Islam.

Approaches of the Tārīkh as a literary text

The following chapters will be the first study to explicitly advocate the use of narratology to escape from the scholarly deadlock concerning classical Islamic history writing. As there have been others who have approached classical Arabic historiography from the vantage point of

31 Bal, p. 18.
literary theory in general, I list a number of key authors to compile an adequate status quaestionis.

An explicitly narratological study of classical Arabic prose that must be mentioned is Daniel Beaumont’s ‘Hard-Boiled: Narrative Discourse in Early Muslim Traditions’ (1996). For our aims of analyzing the structure of a compilatory work, however, this author does not provide many insights as he focuses on the structure of the individual *khabar* and not on that of the compilation as a whole.

Three monographs by authors who are not self-acclaimed narratologists examine literary aspects without touching on the core objects of narratology (such as establishing what part of the text is narrated by which agent). Albrecht Noth’s *Quellenkritische Studien zu Themen, Formen und Tendenzen frühislamischer Geschichtsüberlieferung* (1973) provides, on the basis of an analysis of a wide array of sources, a list of narrative motifs that are found in classical Arabic historiography. Noth charts the recurrence of the same motif in different *akhbār* in order to prove that their reports are unreliable for historical reconstruction. The second part of his book, that was intended to deal with the ‘Tendenzen’, never appeared, so the author only provides a list of motifs without analysing the narrative effects of their use. It is interesting to note that his search for motifs is aimed at arguing that the recurrence of *topoi* proofs that texts like Tabari’s chronicle should not be seen as the work of a single author, in contrast to what was is argued by scholars like Boaz Shoshan and what recently appears to have become scholarly consensus.

Tayeb El-Hibri’s *Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography: Hārūn al-Rashīd and the Narrative of the /uni02BFAbbāsid Caliphate* (1999) sets out to analyse the literary qualities in classical Arabic texts on the early Abbasids, among them Tabari’s *Tārīkh*. El-Hibri sees a large number of indirect intertextual references between *akhbār* found in different compilations, and concludes that these reports must have been created by a group of reporters that shared the same aesthetic criteria. In some instances, El-Hibri gets carried away by his search for hidden allusions, but, more importantly, he fails to explain why these allusions had to remain indirect.

---

Apparently in reaction to El-Hibri’s search for hidden allusions, Boaz Shoshan’s *Poetics of Islamic Historiography: Deconstructing Tabari’s ‘History’* (2004) has focused on those narrative strategies that can be indicated on the surface of the *Tārīkh*. Shoshan names a number of such narrative strategies, and adduces long lists of examples from the *Tārīkh*, but fails to analyse the effect of these strategies on the reader.

In his *Figures de califes entre histoire et fiction* (2006), Matthias Vogt has searched a large number of compilations for reports that deal with the Abbasid caliph al-Amīn and the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd b. Yazīd. By comparing these reports, Vogt tries to identify the position taken towards these caliphs by the author of each compilation. The strength of this study, in comparison to the work of El-Hibri, is that Vogt does take into account in which compilation reports are found and what position these reports occupy within the larger structure of the compilation as a whole. Vogt notices that Tabari has included in his *Tārīkh* reports in favor of the caliph al-Amīn as well as reports against in him, and concludes on this basis that Tabari did not want to choose sides. I would argue here that Tabari painted an ambivalent picture of al-Amīn, not to remain politically neutral, but, on the contrary, to bring across a highly charged assessment. To add both literary and political sophistication to his presentation of events, Tabari showed that good and evil are not easily separated, and that Abbasid caliphs have complex, tragic personalities.

Narratology thrives on the close-reading of texts. Our research will therefore focus on selected passages: analyzing the *Tārīkh* in its entirety, counting almost eight thousand pages in the first printed edition, would be contrary to our research aims. To be able to draw conclusions about Tabari’s narrative strategies throughout the text as a whole, our focus on dream reports has several advantages.

Choosing a single episode such as the biography of a single caliph, or a restricted number of subsequent years, has a drawback. It could be that the sources Tabari consulted for this section were different in style than the sources he used for the other parts of his chronicle. Therefore, this particular section might reflect the idiosyncrasies of the particular

---

35 Vogt, p. 191.
sources Tabari used for that portion of his *Tārīkh*, rather than Tabari’s own style. This drawback is present in the work of those historians studying Tabari only in their attempt at reconstructing specific historic events: they fail to take account of his textual strategies.

A better way of selecting a workable amount is to try to find a particular motif that recurs through all parts of the *Tārīkh*. If such a motif can be found, this is in itself an argument for the thesis that the *Tārīkh* shows compositional unity, and thus shows the creative hand of a single author. Besides, recurring motifs are often used to illustrate a text’s major theme. Analysing the narrative use of a particular recurring motif in the *Tārīkh* can tell us something about the main themes of this text.

Vogt has already acknowledged that literary motifs in classical Arabic historiography are an important object of study that he would have liked to have dealt with in his *Figures de califes entre histoire et fiction*. He notes that dreams are one of such motifs whose function deserves further study:

Dans le cadre de ce travail, il ne nous a pas été possible de traiter du motif littéraire d’une façon systématique...Le rêve, notamment le rêve en relation avec la souveraineté, est un tel motif littéraire.36

Dreaming is here understood as experiencing something while asleep.37 The motif ‘dream’ can be easily and unambiguously detected, because the text specifies itself that a particular experience takes place in a dream, by a number of Arabic expressions that all carry the same meaning: *ra‘ā ru‘yā, ra‘ā fī al-manām, ra‘ā fī al-nawm, ra‘ā hadhā al-layla* or even *ra‘ā ru‘yā fī al-nawm or atāhu fī manāmihi*.

The present study will take seriously Vogt’s suggestion that ‘dreams, especially dreams that relate to sovereignty’ make a fruitful option for further research relative to Tabari’s literary motifs. Vogt’s idea is particularly promising as dreams of rulers are already important in Mesopotamian literature and other pre-modern texts from the Mediterranean world and Europe. In the words of Robert Gnuse, an authority on dreams in the Bible and Late Antiquity, ‘kings in the ancient world supposedly received messages in dreams from deities

36 Vogt, p. 286, my italics.  
concerning the affairs of the state, showing their high status in relationship to the divine realm. Vogt’s hypothesis is also corroborated by those scholars who have remarked upon the fact that rulers are the main focus of the *Tārīkh*. Humphreys, for instance, writes about Tabari’s outlook on history writing:

> Kings are crucial in his scheme of history, for it is only kings among the leaders of humankind who have the luxury of accepting or rejecting God’s grace and guidance. For most of us, the critical moral lessons of history—indeed, the lessons of salvation and damnation—are manifested in the deeds of kings and the fates suffered by them.

That rulers figure as personifications of forces in history is also concluded by Ulrika Mårtensson in an article on the *Tārīkh*:

> Human history is given its observable course through each ruler’s wielding of power...The aim of the History [of Prophets and Kings]: to describe how those whom God has blessed (messengers, kings and caliphs) have wielded power... Thus both rule and succession are of prime interest to Tabari.

That rulers are indeed Tabari’s main focus can be concluded from an analysis of the chronicle’s structure. As will be shown in chapter two, not only an introductory statement by Tabari’s primary narrator, but also several structural aspects of the *Tārīkh* point to this: the various titles under which the work is known that contain the words *mulūk* (kings) and *khulafā* (caliphs), the division according to ‘regnal chapters’ and the extensive ‘obituary entries’ accorded to each caliph.

Vogt’s predilection for dreams of rulers can be modified by pointing out the importance of the Abbasid caliphs for classical Islamic historians, as noted by Humphreys:

> Since 132/750 the crucial issue for every historian had been the stance he ought to take toward the ‘Abbāsids. Should they be presented as usurpers of ‘Alid (or even Umayyad) rights, as legitimate successors to an unbroken caliphal succession stretching back to Abū Bakr, or as the restorers of the purity of Muḥammad’s umma? On one’s resolution of this problem rested his interpretation of Islamic history for the century and a half before the ‘Abbāsid Revolution.

---

40 Mårtensson, p. 300, see also p. 307 en p. 307 n. 76.
41 Humphreys, ‘Ta’rīkh’.
It is highly probable that dreams dreamt by rulers were written for purposes of political propaganda and legitimization of power, as is argued for example by Jacob Lassner.\(^4\) Here, however, we will focus not so much on the literal propagandistic messages put forward in the dreams, but on their function in the narrative.

**Dreams and historiography**

In the wider debate on classical Islamic historiography, that touched upon questions such as fact versus fiction, creative authorship and the historian’s voice, an interesting role is played by dreams. Indeed, within the context of Tabari’s *Tārīkh*, dreams stand out as red flags. Against the background of the dry style, the description of the contents of dreams that indulge in fantastic imagery and metaphor, immediately calls our attention. Likewise, against the background of the realistic events that are reported, the miraculous event of a dream that comes true is immediately conspicuous. Dreams and other miracles have provoked different reactions among different categories of readers.

To a classical Islamic audience, miracles were proof that God intervened in the course of events, and as such miracles were the signposts of Sacred History. If an event had been predicted beforehand, this showed that that particular event was of true historical importance:

Ein Geschehen, für das sich keine Prophezeihungen in seiner Vorzeit ermitteln lassen, ermagelt der grundlegenden Legitimierung als historisches Ereignis von mehr als nur alltäglicher Bedeutung. Die Bedeutung eines Ereignisses und sein Rang in der Geschichte hängen von solchen Antizipationen ab.\(^5\)

Dreams were considered divine messages in which God reveals his plan for the future course of history, and symbolic dreams show that all events are in fact expressions of a deeper, hidden truth. In short, to a classical audience dream reports are key passages that tell them how to interpret historiographical works and the history they speak about. In the words of Vogt: ‘A première vue, les songes n’ont qu’une valeur anecdotique, mais le fait que l’histoire s’y intéresse montre évidem-


ment que l'historien y voit un moyen pour mieux comprendre le passé ainsi que le présent.44

However, to modern positivists since the 19th century up to at least the 1970’s, who want to use works like the Tārīkh for the reconstruction of what has actually happened in the past, dreams and other miracles are unnerving anomalies. The inclusion of dream reports taints their sources, for accounts of miracles undermine the reliability of witness, transmitter and compiler alike. An eyewitness who reports a miracle is obviously lying, and transmitters and compilers who hand down and include such accounts are either superstitious (they believe in miracles) or uncritical (they accept even the most incredulous stories). Thus, whereas a classical audience was constantly on the lookout for dreams to guide their reading, positivists had them best swept under the rug. To paraphrase Chase Robinson in his handbook Islamic Historiography: ‘Dreams were about as useful to pre-modern historians as they are distressing to their modern readers’.45

To a third group of readers, those interested in the literary aspects of historical narrative, miracles such as dreams that come true are an obvious sign of creative fiction. To these readers, the inclusion of a predictive dream proves that an inventive author has been at work. Instead of merely listing the events that happened, this author has added an element of his own, not only to embellish his account with metaphor, but also to provide his interpretation of the link between events, i.e. between earlier prediction and later outcome, and to express his ideas on the order behind this course of events.

**Dreams and narratology**

Dreams not only stand out in Tabari’s Tārīkh and the debate on classical Islamic historiography, but are also highly interesting from the point of view of the method with which we propose to tackle both the text and the larger debate: narratology. As will be shown in chapter six, dreams have great narrative potential. Predictions of future doom are essential in provoking the particular behaviour that forms the gist of tragedy. Such forecasts are ideal to hint how the story might develop, and as these hints may be interpreted differently by reader and character, they are highly useful in creating the discrepancy in knowledge between the two that results in dramatic irony.

44 Vogt, p. 267.
45 Robinson, pp. 150-152.
Predictions based on dreams have even more narrative potential than those based on other omina. Whereas other omina are just patterns, dreams are texts, sometimes even narrative texts in their own right.46 As no one can corroborate what a dreamer experiences in the privacy of his sleep, dreams can be said only to exist as texts, when they are reported the next morning to another human being. According to some Ancient Near Eastern traditions, the basis for the oneiromantic interpretation is not what the dreamer experiences while asleep, but what he tells to the interpreter. The way a dream is told is the way it will come true. In the words of the Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad: 'Only when it is expressed, only when it is told, does the prophecy contained in the dream become potent.'47

Not only are dreams texts, the interpretation of dreams is also like the interpretation of texts. Oneirocritics use the same methods as textual exegeses: they look for metaphor, hyperbole, paronomasia and punning.48 Since oneirocriticism is similar to the interpretation of texts, readers can provide their own interpretation of dreams, which allows for an additional element of foreshadowing, as will be explained in chapter six.

Earlier studies of the narrative function of dreams in classical Arabic prose

Whereas El-Hibri and Vogt have paid passing attention to dreams that occur in classical Arabic historiography from a literary point of view, they did not try to explain the central status of dreams in this genre.49 In addition to the works by El-Hibri and Vogt, there are three journal articles that deal with the narrative function of dreams in other genres than historiography.

Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1980) has set out to study how dreams function in entries from a biographical dictionary, but her conclusions are blurred by the abuse of narratological jargon. Giovanni Canova

---

(1984) has analysed the narrative function of dreams in the sīra shā'biyya. He argues that these popular epics are fundamentally different from official Arabic literature, but—as will be shown in chapter six—his conclusions that dreams serve to add suspense and tragedy are equally applicable to a canonical text such as Tabari’s Tārīkh. In a complex article from 1994, that has hitherto been largely neglected by western scholarship on dreams in Islam but which merits further attention, the Egyptian philosopher Nasr Abu Zayd has studied the narrative function of dreams in the Koran and Ibn Ishāq’s biography of the Prophet.

Abu Zayd studies whether dreams function as a ‘narrative incentive’ (ḥāfīz sardī) or as a ‘semantic unit’ (wiḥda dalāliyya). A narrative incentive is an element that reopens the story at a point where it has come to a standstill. According to Abu Zayd, a dream that functions as such a narrative incentive is Pharaoh’s dream of the cows in the Koran. After having been falsely accused of raping his master’s wife, Joseph is sent to prison where he is forgotten: the story has arrived at a dead end. However, Pharaoh’s inexplicable dream provides the incentive to reopen the narrative. It provides a reason to fetch Joseph from prison, which in turn leads to the hero’s come-back: he is appointed as Pharaoh’s second-in-command and reunited with his family.

It seems that with a ‘semantic unit’, Abu Zayd means an indispensable element of a story’s fabula, an element that has to be included in even the shortest summary of a story. Joseph’s dream of the prostrating stars is such a semantic unit, as it does much more than serve as the incentive to open the Joseph story: its fulfilment also provides closure to the story, and references to this dream are found throughout the narrative.

Tabari’s Tārīkh and the Bible

Narratology is a broad field with an overwhelming amount of specialized technical terms. To keep this thesis understandable to scholars from outside the field of literary studies, and to reassure those weary of fashionable but ultimately evasive jargon, the narratological termino-

logy in this research has been kept to a bare minimum. I will base my analyses mostly on two theoretical works: the straightforward but comprehensive overviews by Mieke Bal (Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, 1997) and Slomith Rimmon-Kenan (Narrative Fiction, 1983). Besides the terms author, primary narrator and secondary narrator I will also use the terms suspense, dramatic irony, foreshadowing and tragedy, all of which will be explained in chapter six.

In the context of dream reports, our analysis will be restricted to an analysis of Tabari’s Tārīkh as a self-contained unity, in accordance to the ideal narratological approach. The main modification of this ideal is that we cannot leave dream reports from the Bible out of consideration. The biblical influences on Tabari were in all probability not direct but through a variety of Jewish, Christian, and early Islamic legends. Ignoring these intermediate stages, we will compare passages on dreams from the Tārīkh with passages from a modern English translation of the Bible. This approach has the explicit purpose of emphasizing that Tabari’s Tārīkh is part of that same cultural tradition which has deeply imbued the culture of Europe.

In this connection, our research will follow scholars such as Robinson who have placed Tabari’s text into the larger framework of the ‘grand narrative’ of biblical history: ‘the Islamic polity following the Persian and the Persian following the Israelite—the great transitio emperii (succession of empires) that also interested the historians of the Christian west’. To quote Robinson more fully:

The entire framework of pre-Islamic history—organized by a succession of polities, led by prophets or kings, and all transient—is made to presage the appearance of the Islamic polity under the leadership of Muhammad and then of the Abbasid caliphate itself. Universal history in the hands of al-Tabari is similarly teleological: some 14,000 years are covered in the ca. 8,000 pages of his History of Prophets and Kings, and history marches single file...Prophets familiar to us from the Biblical tradition, such as Moses and Abraham, are recast in terms made familiar to Muslims by Muhammad’s experience, while the pre-Islamic prophets in Arabia, who are entirely unfamiliar to anyone unread in the Qurān, are also made to follow the monotheist pattern.

---

54 Bal, p. 179.
56 Robinson, p. 137.
As we shall try to demonstrate, dream reports enabled teleologically oriented historians such as Tabari to repeat motifs that stress correspondences in remote historical periods, in passages that are hundreds of pages apart in his chronicle. We will test Robinson’s hypothesis that the literary patterning that characterizes Tabari’s pre-Islamic coverage also characterizes Islamic history, with the result that it is made ‘both relentlessly chronological and deeply mythical’:

[Classical] historians certainly made Muḥammad conform to the monotheist tradition that Muslims were themselves claiming—so much so, in fact, that his representation in the sīra presumes an understanding of early prophetic history, especially stories about Moses. Similar things can be said for...later political crises, such as...the civil war...between rival brothers to succeed Ḥārūn al-Rashīd (d. 809), where al-ʿĀmin and al-Maʿmūn are in some respects patterned after Cain and Abel.57

As a prequel to the close reading of specific dream reports, this thesis will first provide a more general analysis of Tabari’s text (chapter two). We will analyze the meaning of the term tārīkh in the title of the work, and present the various editions and the English translation. More importantly, the structure of the section of the Tārīkh that deals with Islamic history (the part that has most puzzled modern readers) will be analyzed from a narratological perspective. Under the heading ‘Conventions of reticence’ we will provide a synthesis of the various suggestions given in the scholarly literature why Tabari refrains from directly commenting on events and on his sources.

These findings will provide the background for our analysis of the narrative function of dreams in the Tārīkh. Chapter three will start with dreams from the pre-Islamic section. It will analyse a type of ruler dream that recurs six times in the Tārīkh and compare Tabari’s treatment of this dream with its models in the Old and New Testaments. Chapters four, five and six will continue with ruler dreams from the Islamic section, focussing on the dreams of Abbasid caliphs. Special attention will be paid to the question whether motifs from the pre-Islamic section of the Tārīkh, as treated in chapter two, also occur in the Islamic section.

Chapter seven will synthesize all findings and reach conclusions about the importance of narratology for the study of classical Islamic history writing.

57 Robinson, p. 138.
Tabari’s *Tārīkh*:
*History, Chronology, or Catalogue?*

Many modern readers have expressed their feeling that Tabari’s *Tārīkh* is ‘strange’, because it does not meet our expectations of what constitutes a story or a historiographical text. Reviewers of the English translation expressed this estrangement in no uncertain terms, admitting that they are ‘bewildered’, ‘exasperated’, even ‘infuriated’ by Tabari’s style. One speaks of the ‘sometimes rather bewildering approach of al-Tabari’s work—quite different not only from modern historiography but from the narrative manner of Herodotus and Thucydides that sets the style for historical writing in the West.’\(^1\) M.G. Carter mentions Tabari’s ‘habit of meticulously, not to say obtrusively providing alternative versions of events at the apparent cost of destroying narrative clarity and undermining psychological plausibility’.\(^2\)

---

A third reviewer develops on Tabari’s

...exasperating paratactical method. He strings together without comment or explanation anecdotal material ranging in quality from convincing comments about the socioeconomic considerations that went into selecting the site for Baghdad to ridiculous fables about the magic mirror that enabled al-Mansur to discern friend from foe. The reports are often so repetitive, so disjointed, so full of cryptic comments, so apparently pointless as to leave the most diligent reader utterly bewildered.'

The novelist and literary critic Robert Irwin, finally, counts himself among those who have read al-Ṭabarî and have been infuriated by the man’s noncommittal presentation of variant accounts of past events'.

Such an approach is largely negative, for it only defines what Tabari’s text is not: the Tārīkh does not resemble modern historiography or the works of Herodotus and Thucydides; Tabari destroys narrative clarity, undermines psychological plausibility, his work is without comment or explanation, disjointed and pointless. Very few scholars have made the next step to a more positive approach: if the Tārīkh does not resemble historiographical narrative as we know it, what does it resemble?

In this chapter, I will subject Tabari’s text to a thorough narratological analysis and argue that the Tārīkh has the structure of a catalogue. Such a merely descriptive approach, however, is not enough. The third step is to provide a satisfactory answer to the question why Tabari chose to give his text such a format.

A number of scholars have tried to explain the Tārīkh’s strange format by suggesting that Tabari was restricted by various conventions of his day. While knowledge of the conventions of his time makes Tabari’s behaviour seem slightly less strange, by itself this is still a negative approach. It assumes that Tabari was not able to give his text the form of a ‘fully developed’ historical narrative because he was too deeply imbued by the conservative taboos of his society and lacked the imaginative power and genius to break free from them.

For a long time the author of the Tārīkh was seen as an unimaginative compiler of the works of others, who did not himself hold an opinion, or at least refrained from expressing it in ant for whatsoever. Since the bewilderment expressed by the reviewers in the 1990’s, most schol-

5 For example Shoshan, pp. 111-3.
ars have come to agree during the last decade that Tabari ‘in some indirect way’ does state his preference for one account of events over others and thereby indirectly offers his judgement on the characters and their actions. This view has also helped in rendering Tabari a little less strange in our eyes: It assumes that, after all, Tabari did set out to do what we expect him to do, and at least tried to tell a story. This view fails, however, to fully explain Tabari’s method, for it does not explain why Tabari, if he did want to narrate, did not do so openly. Merely pointing here to the conventions of his time is again a negative approach, for it assumes that Tabari narrated indirectly because he did not dare completely to cast off the conventions that hampered him, that wanted to narrate, but did not dare to confront his public openly. In this context it is argued for example that Tabari hid his opinions out of fear he might get stoned by an angry mob of Ḥanbalites. Even El-Hibri, for whom indirect narrative is such an essential feature of his reappraisal of accounts of Abbasid history found in the works of Tabari and others, fails to come up with a complete explanation why authors like Tabari did not chose to narrate openly.

In this chapter I will synthesize in a single overview the various literary and epistemological conventions of Tabari’s day, as suggested by a number of modern scholars, and add some suggestions of my own. More importantly, I will take a radical but ultimately obvious step, which is not even fully taken by Shoshan in his monograph on the poetics of the Tārīkh. I will not approach Tabari as a passive victim to the conventions of his day, but argue that Tabari deliberately chose to adhere to these conventions for rhetorical effect. So not only will I analyse what the Tārīkh resembles if it does not resemble a story, I will also analyse why Tabari chose to give it this form, and why he chose to narrate indirectly. I will argue that the format of the Tārīkh is not an anomaly, but its strength.

In this chapter, I will make the following argument:

1. Tabari’s Tārīkh has the outward appearance of a catalogue of akhbār;

---


7 Hodgson, Venture, I, p. 352-3; Tayob, p. 205; but see Shoshan’s argument that Tabari’s conflict with the Ḥanbalites came too late to effect the formation of the Tārīkh: Shoshan p. 112. On Tabari and the Ḥanbalites see also Rosenthal, General Introduction, pp. 69-78.
2. Tabari has given his work the format of a catalogue to make it appear that he is not a storyteller but merely a reliable transmitter of reports;

3. These appearances, however, are deceptive. By way of strategies such as motif repetition, an implicit story is told;

4. Dreams are particularly well suited for such implicit storytelling.

**THE MEANING OF THE TERM ‘TĀRĪKH’ IN THE TITLES OF TABARI’S TEXT**

We will begin our structural analysis of Tabari’s text with an analysis of some of the titles that have been given to the work, its editions, and the English translation.

Tabari himself titled his work Mukhtaṣar tārīkh al-rusul wa-mulāk (Abridged tārīkh of prophets and kings) or Mukhtaṣar tārīkh al-rusul wa-mulāk wa-l-khulafā’ (Abridged tārīkh of prophets, kings and caliphs). He probably called his voluminous text ‘abridged’ to indicate that its subject matter, the men and women who ruled the world since Creation, ideally required an even longer treatment. To later generations, the book became simply known as ‘The Tārīkh’, probably for two reasons. It was seen to form a pair with another text that made Tabari famous, his exegesis of the Koran, which was simply known as ‘The Tafsīr’ (The Exegesis). Second and more important, his work on the past was called The Tārīkh because it was considered the text par excellence in its genre, that replaced all previous efforts in this field and set the standards for all later historians.

The subject matter of the work is clear. As the last parts of Tabari’s titles indicate, it is about prophets, kings and caliphs, i.e. about the messengers sent by God to man, as well as about worldly rulers. The form of the text is less evident, for what tārīkh actually means in this context is unclear. Literally, the Arabic tārīkh means ‘time’ (compare to Greek khronos) or ‘dating; determination of the date’ (from the verb ṣarrakha) and hence ‘chronology’. The term tārīkh, however, is also translated as ‘history’ in the sense of ‘story about events that took place in the past’, from the Greek verb historeo in its meaning ‘to tell a story’. It is this translation of ‘History’ which is commonly used to render the title of Tabari’s text. However, whether it is fitting to translate the word tārīkh

---


9 Rosenthal, pp. 130-1.

in this title as ‘history’ remains to be seen. As we have stated in the introduction to this thesis, Tabari’s text raises a number of questions: does he tell a story about past events, using storytelling techniques to explain what caused them and how they influenced other events? Did he use storytelling techniques to captivate and move his readers by adorning his presentation of past events with suspense and tragedy? Or does he only provide a dry list of events or a dry catalogue of eyewitness reports without commentary?

al-Tārīkh = The Chronology

As will be argued below, Tabari’s Tārīkh has the outward appearance of a list of events, which are presented in a rigid chronological order. In this sense, al-Tārīkh can be translated as ‘The Chronology’, meaning a chronological list of rulers and of the events that took place during their reign. Such a translation is supported by a passage in the beginning of Tabari’s work, where his primary narrator announces that he will mention rulers ‘in conjunction with their time’ and state the length of their lives and the time of their deaths:

In this book of mine, I shall mention whatever information (khabr) has reached us about kings throughout the ages…There were messengers sent by God, kings placed in authority, or caliphs established in the caliphal succession…Every one of them whom I shall mention in this book of mine will be mentioned in conjunction with his time but (only) summaries of the events of his day and age will be added…This will be combined with references to the length of their natural life and the time of their death.11

In other passages, the term tārīkh is used as a synonym of azmān, ‘times’ and ayyām, ‘days’, which implies that we should render tārīkh as ‘dates’, ‘chronology’.

In this book of ours we…intend to present the tārīkh of past kings and summaries of the reports about them; the times of the messengers and prophets and the spans of their lives; as well as the days of the early caliphs and some of their biographies.12

---

11 Tab. I, 5.
12 Tab. I, 6, my translation.
Wa-kāna al-gharaʾf ʾi kitābin hādhā dhikr mā qad bayyana annā dhākirūhu min taʾrīkh al-mulāk...wa-azmān al-rusul wa-l-anbiyāʾ

The stated purpose of this book of ours is to mention the taʾrīkh of kings...as well as the times of the prophets and the messengers.13

In this sense of tārīkh as ‘chronology’, the only objective of Tabari’s work was to establish in what order events succeeded each other and, for the part dealing with events since the hijra, to establish in exactly what year they took place. In such a chronological list, there is no place for commentary or authorial interpretation of these events.

al-Tārīkh = The (Chronologically Arranged) Catalogue

Another way to look at Tabari’s Tārīkh is to see it as compendium of quotations from the works of earlier authors. In this sense, the objective of Tabari was to provide an anthology that was both comprehensive and searchable: to collect all known reliable akhbār into one text and to make this huge collection searchable by way of a rigid system of classification. Such a catalogue would be used in the same way that we use a phone book: it was not to be read from cover to cover but each time to be consulted to easily locate the correct reading of a single item in the collection.

In this sense, we can translate al-Tārīkh as ‘The (chronologically arranged) Catalogue’, as the word catalogue carries the meanings of comprehensiveness and searchability, and at the same time implies absence of interpretation or mutual comparison of the elements. To approach Tabari’s work as a catalogue is a novel reading that has not yet been proposed elsewhere in the scholarly literature.14 However, the reading of Tabari’s title as a ‘chronologically arranged catalogue of akhbār’ is supported by descriptions of Tabari’s work by pre-modern Arabic readers. The title of a 16th-century copy of Tabari’s work stresses that fact that this book deals not only with kings and prophets but also with the akhbār about them:

Tārīkh al-mulāk wa-akhbārühum wa-mawālid al-rusul wa-anbāʾühum
Tārīkh of kings and reports about them and birthdates of prophets and accounts about them15

13 Tab. I, 78.
14 But see Keegan, p. 15 & p. 19.
Here, anbā‘uhum, ‘accounts about them’, is used as a parallel or synonym to akhbārūhum, ‘reports about them.’ Likewise, tārīkh is used as a synonym to mawālid, ‘birthdates’, and should therefore not be translated as ‘history; but rather as ‘dates, chronology’. One of Tabari’s students also stresses the fact that his master’s work deals with akhbār and calls the text:

Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk wa-akhbārūhum wa-man kāna fī zaman kull wāhīd minhum

Tārīkh of prophets and kings and reports about them and those who lived in the time of each one of them.

In this case, we could even vocalize tārīkhu l-rusuli wa-l-mulūki wa-akhbārihim and conclude that tārīkhu forms a genitive construction not only with al-rusuli and al-mulūki but also with akhbārihim. Tārīkhu...akhbārihim can not mean ‘a history...of reports about them’, for a ‘history of reports’ doesn’t make sense. Tārīkhu...akhbārihim could, however, mean: ‘a chronology...of reports about them’, i.e. ‘a catalogue of akhbār arranged in chronological order’.

As we shall see below, the ambiguity of the term Tārīkh (History, Chronology, or Catalogue) is indicative of the many layers of Tabari’s text: this work has the form of a chronological list of rulers, of a dry list of events without commentary, as well as that of a catalogue of quotations, and on top of that it also contains elements of a story.

De Goeje’s Leiden Edition

In the last quarter of the 19th century, Tabari’s Tārīkh was edited in Leiden by an international team of scholars, headed by the Dutch Orientalist Michiel Jan de Goeje. These editors established their final text on the basis of a large number of manuscripts from different countries, none of which carried the complete text of Tabari’s work. As the Arabic title for their edition they chose Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk, and as Latin title Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed Ibn Djari At-Tabari.17


Compare with the title of a work by al-İsfahānī: Maqātil al-Tālibiyīn wa-akhbārūhum.

16 Rosenthal, General Introduction, p. 131. Rosenthal translates the title as ‘History of the messengers and kings and their historical record and all those who lived in the time of each one of them.’

('Annals' suggest the equivalent of a diary in which events are recorded shortly after they have taken place, in this case not every day but every year. Although Tabari might have wanted to raise such a suggestion of reliable year-to-year reportage among his readers, he did not, in fact, record events shortly after they took place; instead, he collected reports about events from several centuries ago.)

The Leiden team chose to edit the *Annales* in three parts or 'series'. The first series ends with the death of the last Râshîdûn caliph in the year 40 H. The second series treats the period of Umayyad rule, until the end of the year 130, when the Umayyad forces were beaten by the Abbasid rebels in Khurasan, two years before the first Abbasid became caliph in 132 H. The third series treats the Abbasid period up to 302 H., eight years before Tabari's death in 310 H. Included at the end of this third series is a list of biographies of the Prophet's Companions and Successors and transmitters of hadith, which Tabari wrote as a supplement to his *Târikh*.

Ibrâhîm's Cairo Edition

In the years 1960-69 the Egyptian scholar Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrâhîm published a new edition of Tabari's *Târikh*, based on a comparison between De Goeje's *Annales* and additional manuscripts from Istanbul that had not been available to the Leiden Orientalists. Ibrâhîm titled his edition *Târikh al-Tabari: Târikh al-rusul wa-l-mulûk*.

Ibrâhîm’s new edition didn’t differ much from De Goeje’s text, with one important exception: the Egyptian editor changed the lay-out of the Leiden edition by turning some phrases of running text into extra headings, and adding headings of his own invention which he put between square brackets. This allows the modern reader easier reference, but also breaks up the structure of the entries as they are found in the Leiden edition (more on these entries below).

---

Between 1985 and 1999, the *Ṭārīkh* was translated into English as *The History of al-Ṭabarî: An Annotated Translation*. The 39 volumes were translated by different scholars, who based their work on a combined reading of the Cairo and the Leiden editions. The translators reproduced all the headings from the Cairo edition, but omitted Ibrāhīm’s square brackets, and added headings of their own. All these headings were included in the tables of contents which are found at the beginning of each volume of the translation.

This translation, while being an invaluable research tool, has two drawbacks. A single text has been chopped up into 39 individual books, and the headings that were added distort our view of the structure of the Arabic original. One of the reviewers comments:

> The process of the translation has completely restructured the narrative internally by subjecting it to Western sentence and paragraph conventions which on many occasions do not seem to this reviewer to reflect the only possible cohesion between the ideas in the text.

Both Ibrāhīm and the English translators have added the original pagination of De Goeje’s edition in the margin of their works. When I refer to a passage from Tabari’s *Ṭārīkh*, I only give the series and page numbers of the Leiden edition, even if I quote from the translation. To easily locate the correct volume of the translation in which these quotes can be found, Table I has been devised, which shows the correspondence between the three series of the Leiden edition and the 39 volumes of the English translation.

### The Structure of the *Ṭārīkh*: A Narratological Analysis

The *Ṭārīkh* can be divided into two parts that have a narratologically different structure. The first part deals with the prophets that preceded Muhammad, as well as the kings that ruled the world to just before the *hijra*, when Muhammad migrated to Medina and became the first Islamic ruler. This part occupies one sixth of the total text. The second...
Dreams of Rulers in Tabari’s History of Prophets and Kings

part, that starts with the beginning of the hijra calendar, deals with the Islamic rulers and the events that took place during their reigns: Muhammad’s time as head of the umma and the reigns of his successors the caliphs: the Rāshidūn, the Umayyads and the Abbasids. Whereas the first part about the pre-Islamic rulers consists of more or less continuous narrative, the second, Islamic part deals with events according to a rigid year-by-year treatment. It is this part which can be said to have the form of a catalogue, and it is this part which we will now subject to a structural analysis.

The Author and His Narrators

In the introduction to his Poetics of Islamic Historiography, that set out to ‘deconstruct’ Tabari’s Tārīkh, Boaz Shoshan gives a very short analysis of the structure of Tabari’s work. He discerns three types of text in the Islamic section: ‘short reports no longer than a few lines, called khabar in Arabic; medium-sized reports of a few dozen lines; and longer reports that sometimes transcend the boundaries of a particular year, and which could be called “chapters”.’

As Shoshan’s threepartite division is wildly incorrect and as the English translation has distorted our view of the original layout of Tabari’s text, we will here provide a more detailed analysis of its structure. Such an analysis will enable us to progress beyond the statement that the Tārīkh does not look like the historiography we are used to, and help us to formulate what it does look like.

As this will be a narratological analysis, my primary interest is in the narrators of the different types of text. If one looks at the narrators figuring in the Islamic part, one sees that the text can be divided into two types: words uttered by the primary narrator of the Tārīkh; and words spoken by other narrators who are quoted by this primary narrator (secondary narrators).

As was explained in chapter one, readers should not forget that all narrators in a text, both primary and secondary, are voices orchestrated by the author, puppets that obey to his strings, mouthpieces that he can use to his liking. The primary narrator is not automatically identical with the author, but one of his creations, that might voice the author’s opinions but doesn’t necessarily have to. The secondary narrators can also be considered as the author’s creations: they might voice the opinions of other writers, but they might just as well be used by the author.

23 Shoshan, pp. xxix-xxx.
as a way to voice his own opinions indirectly. Words voiced by secondary narrators might in fact have been invented by the author, while words voiced by the primary narrator might in fact have been copied from the works of earlier authors.

As Tabari’s oral informants are long dead and as the great majority of his written sources have not been preserved, we will never be able to know for sure whether the words put in the mouth of the Tārīkh’s primary narrator are actually Tabari’s own words. Maybe some of the words of the primary narrator were slavishly copied from earlier chronicles. Likewise, we do not know whether Tabari, when citing secondary narrators, quoted his sources verbatim, or whether, and to what extent, Tabari rewrote the material he claims to transmit from earlier authorities. We are not even sure whether Tabari did not invent completely new material, which he might have put in the mouth of secondary narrators to express his opinion indirectly.

The words spoken by the secondary narrators make up short narratives, spanning a couple of lines up to a maximum of around three pages. Whatever their length, the term khabar (pl. akhbar) should refer to these narratives put in the mouth of secondary narrators. These akhbar often have the form of eyewitness accounts; their narrators were witnesses to the events they speak about, sometimes even characters who caused or underwent these events. In their reports, these narrators often quote characters using direct speech, something which is never done by the primary narrator. ‘It is one of the conventions of khabar narrative that the reportage of direct speech requires a witness present at the scene to hear it.’

A khabar consists of an isnād (a chain of transmitters) followed by a matn (the narrative text uttered by the last person in the chain). In narratological terms, when presenting a khabar, the primary narrator quotes a secondary narrator (the first person in the isnād), who in turn quotes a tertiary narrator etc., until the last link in the isnād is reached, who is often an eyewitness or participant of the events dealt with in the matn. Although the last person in the isnād might officially be a narrator of much higher levels, I will, for clarity’s sake, refer to all these transmitters in the isnād as secondary narrators, to distinguish them from the Tārīkh’s primary narrator.

What follows below in smaller font is a detailed, technical analysis of the structure of one ‘year chapter’ from the Tārīkh’s annalistic, Islamic section, based on the example of the year 193 H.

---

Dreams of Rulers in Tabari’s History of Prophets and Kings

Year Chapters and Their Entries

The Islamic part of the Tārīkh is made up of ‘year chapters’, that list a number of events which took place during a particular year. In Table II we see an example of such a chapter, dealing with the year 193 H. Among the events that took place during this year was the death of the Abbasid caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, an event which will be dealt with in more detail in chapter five of this thesis.25

Every year chapter starts with an introductory formula: ‘Then the year x began’, followed by a heading: ‘Mentioning of (the reportage on) the events that took place during it’ Dhikr (al-khabr /uni02BFan) mā kāna fīhā min al-aḥdāth. Under this heading, Tabari’s primary narrator presents a list of events that happened during that particular year, which we shall call the ‘key events.’ To each key event an entry has been devoted. In Table II, I have given each entry a code. 193.7, for example, refers to the seventh entry of year chapter 193. The year 193 contains twelve of such entries. Each entry begins with the words ‘In this year... (wa-fī hādhihi al-sana...). In De Goeje’s edition a line is drawn above this introductory formula to make it stand out from the rest of the text and enable readers to quickly locate the beginning of a new entry. Key events can be very simple, and merely state: ‘In this year, so-and-so died/rebelled/was appointed’ (entries 1, 2, 5 and 10).

In some cases, the key event of an entry is actually made up of a short series of related events, caused or undergone by the same actors, in fact constituting a small story (entries 4, 7, 8 and 9). For simplicity’s sake, both a single event and a short series of events presented by the primary narrator are referred to as the key event of an entry.

Some entries contain akhābār. In this case the primary narrator quotes a secondary narrator who tells a story that touches in some way upon the entry’s key event. Some of these secondary narrators are mentioned by name, others remain anonymous, when it is simply stated: ‘It has been mentioned that...’. In Table II, these akhābār have also been given a code. 193.5.2, for example, refers to the second khabar of the fifth entry of year chapter 193. As we can see, the number of such reports contained in a single entry varies greatly, from not a single khabār to more than thirty, such as in entry 193.5 on the death of Hārūn al-Rashīd.

If we only list the words spoken by the primary narrator as is done in Table II, the fifty-nine pages that are occupied by year chapter 193 in the English translation easily fit on just two pages. In other words, the akhābār occupy much more space than the key events. Therefore, the large majority of Tabari’s Tārīkh consists not of primary narrator speech, but of words put in the mouth of others. This is what gives rise to the impression ‘that Arabic historical writing

25 193 H. corresponds to October 25, 808–October 14, 809 AD.
contains more direct speech than is found in the literature of any other civilization. In some entries with a large number of *akhbār*, such as 193.5 and 193.7, headings are used to divide these *akhbār* among subsections that share a sub-topic. These are called here ‘internal entry headings’ and mostly begin with the words ‘Mentioning of the reportage on...’ (*Dhikr al-khabr* ‘ an...). In contrast to the headings added by Ibrāhīm and by the English translators, the headings in De Goeje’s edition are only found within an entry. In other words, in the Leiden text headings are used to highlight the internal structure of a single entry, that is, to title or subdivide the *akhbār* section of that entry. Headings are not used to name an entire entry or to combine different entries under one thematic heading, with the exception of the headings that introduce a new year or the reign of a new caliph (on the latter see below).

**Obituary Entries and Regnal Chapters**

The particular entry that deals with the death of a caliph not only lists *akhbār* which deal with the specific event of the death itself, but is also used to classify material which could not be put in other entries, such as general statistics regarding the caliph’s reign, and *akhbār* about general aspects of the caliph’s behaviour during his life. These entries could be called ‘obituary entries’. For example, the entry on the death of caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (193.5) has the following structure. After Harun’s death has been dealt with in nine *akhbār*, the entry changes its character. Firstly, under the heading *Dhikr wilāt al-amīr fi ayyām Hārūn al-Rashīd*, the primary narrator presents a list of the governors over the provincial capitals during Hārūn’s reign. Then, under the heading ‘Mentioning of some biographical *akhbār* about al-Rashīd’ (*Dhikr ba’d siyar al-Rashīd*), he quotes sixteen *akhbār* that do not deal with Hārūn’s death but with various aspects of his behaviour during his life. Then the primary narrator presents a list of Hārūn’s wives, sons and daughters, which is followed by seven other *akhbār* concerning the caliph’s general behaviour. One could say that, after those *akhbār* are listed which deal with the specific event of the death itself, the entry changes from an annalistic entry into an entry from a biographical dictionary. In these works, each entry deals with the life of an individual, as opposed to annals where each entry deals with a single event. After each obituary entry, De Goeje’s text starts with a new heading which has the form *Khilāfat...*‘The Caliphate of...’ In other words, after the last entry of the life of the previous caliph, a new reign begins. This division of Tabari’s *Tārīkh* into subsequent caliphal reigns can be described as a secondary structuring principle which coexists with the division according to years.

---

26 Carter, p. 140.
28 On ‘regnal chapters’ see also Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, p. 75.
Table II: Primary Narrator Speech in Year Chapter 193

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>entry code</th>
<th>words uttered by the primary narrator</th>
<th>page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>193</td>
<td>Then the year 193 began.</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentioning of the reportage on the events that took place during it</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.1</td>
<td>Among these events was the death of al-Fadl b. Yahyā b. Khālid al-Barmak</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in prison at al-Raqqah in the month of Muḥarram.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.1.1</td>
<td>According to what has been mentioned (...) he had previously been wont to</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;I don't want al-Rashīd to die (before me),&quot; and people used to say to him in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reply, &quot;Don't you want God to grant you deliverance (i.e. release from existence in prison)?&quot; But he would</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>answer, &quot;My fate is linked with his fate.&quot; (...) He died (...) five months before al-Rashīd's own death (...)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.2</td>
<td>In this year, Sa‘īd al-Ṭabarī, known as al-Jawhari, died.</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.3</td>
<td>In this year, Hārūn reached Jurjān in the month of Şafar, and there met</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>him in Jurjān the treasuries of ‘Alī b. ‘Isa, conveyed on the backs of fifteen hundred camels.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.4</td>
<td>In this year, there took place a battle campaign between Harthama and</td>
<td>734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rāfi’i’s partisans, in the course of which Harthama conquered Bukhārā and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>took prisoner Rāfi’i’s brother Bashīr b. al-Layth. He then sent the latter to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>al-Rashīd at Tūs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.4.1</td>
<td>It has been mentioned from Ibn Jāmi’ al-Marwazi, from his father, that he</td>
<td>734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>said: &quot;I was one of those who brought Rāfi’i’s brother to al-Rashīd.&quot; He related:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Bashīr went into al-Rashīd’s presence, when the caliph was lying on a bed, elevated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>above the ground by the length of the bone of the forearm (...)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.5</td>
<td>In this year, Hārūn al-Rashīd died.</td>
<td>735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentioning of the reportage on the cause of his death and the place where he died</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.5.1</td>
<td>It has been mentioned from Jibrīl b. Bukhtīshū that he said: &quot;I was with al-Rashīd in al-Raqqah, and I used</td>
<td>735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to be the first to come in to him each morning, so that I might learn how he had passed the night (...)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.5.2</td>
<td>It has been mentioned by a certain authority that Jibrīl b. Bukhtīshū had made a mistake regarding al-Rashīd’s</td>
<td>737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>illness in some treatment he prescribed for him which was, in fact, the cause of his death. Al-Rashīd had</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>therefore decided, the night in which he died, to put Jibrīl to death and have his limbs dismembered just as</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>he had Rāfi’i’s brother dismembered (...)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.5.3</td>
<td>[…]</td>
<td>737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.5.9</td>
<td>Mentioning of the governorship over the provincial capitals during the days of Hārūn al-Rashīd</td>
<td>739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.5.10</td>
<td>[a list of governors over major cities]</td>
<td>739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentioning of some biographical reports (siyar) on al-Rashīd</td>
<td>740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.5.26</td>
<td>[…]</td>
<td>740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.5.27</td>
<td>Mentioning of the free wives of al-Rashīd that were endowed with substantial dowries</td>
<td>756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.5.33</td>
<td>[…]</td>
<td>757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.6</td>
<td>The caliphate of al-‘Amīn</td>
<td>764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>193.6.1</td>
<td>In this year, allegiance was sworn to Muḥammad al-‘Amīn b. Hārūn as</td>
<td>764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>caliph at the camp of al-Rashīd. ‘Abdallāh b. Hārūn (al-Ma’mūn) was in Marw at the time.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this year, the discord between al-Amīn Muḥammad and his brother al-Maʿmūn began. Each of them determined to oppose the other in what their father, Hārūn, had enjoined them to carry out in the document that we have mentioned that he drew up as an obligation for them and between them.

In this year, Umm Jaʿfar left al-Raqqa in the month of Shaʿbān, taking all the treasures and other things she had there. Her son, Muḥammad al-Amīn, met her at al-Anbār with all the dignitaries who had been in Baghdad. Al-Maʿmūn established himself in charge of that to which he had been appointed—that is, the governorship of Khurāsān and its districts as far as al-Rayy. He wrote to al-Amīn and sent him many gifts. Al-Maʿmūn’s letters to Muḥammad arrived one after the other, extolling the latter’s greatness, and accompanied by gifts of Khurāsānian rarities—furniture, vessels, musk, beasts, and weapons.

In this year, Harthama entered the wall of Samarqand. Rāfiʿ took refuge in the inner city and sent a message to the Turks, who came to him. Harthama was caught between Rāfiʿ and the Turks, but the Turks withdrew, and Rāfiʿ grew weaker.

In this year, Nicephorus, king of the Byzantines, died fighting the Bulgars.

In this year, the pilgrimage was led this year by Dāwūd b. ʿĪsā b. Muḥammad b. ʿAlī, the governor of Mecca.

In this year, Muḥammad b. Hārūn (al-Amīn) confirmed his brother al-Qāsim b. Hārūn in the governorship of al-Jazīra to which his father had appointed him. He appointed Khuzayma b. Khāzīm to be al-Qāsim’s agent for al-Jazīra, and he also confirmed al-Qāsim over Qinnasrīn and the frontier strongholds.

**Legenda**

In the middle column of this table, we find all the words uttered by the primary narrator in year chapter 193, a year that contains twelve entries. In the left-hand column, I have given each entry a code. Some entries contain ʿakhbār, put in the mouth of secondary narrators. These are only indicated here by a code in a smaller font. Of some ʿakhbār, however, I have quoted part of their content, as these reports will be treated in chapter five of this thesis. Long lists of ʿakhbār have been compressed using the symbol ‘[…]’. By far the longest entry in this year chapter is the obituary entry devoted to the death of the caliph. After this obituary entry, a new regnal chapter begins, ‘The caliphate of al-Amīn’.
The Relation between Key Events and Akhbār

The previous analysis can be summarized as follows. The Islamic section of the Tārīkh is made up of entries that consist of two types of material: 1) a key event presented by the primary narrator and 2) akhbār put in the mouth of secondary narrators.

What is the relation between the key event and the akhbār that have been included in the same entry? What is the function of these key events, and what is the function of the akhbār? In other words, is Tabari primarily interested in (knowledge of) the key events, or in (knowledge of) the akhbār?

1. akhbār state the cause of the key event

From internal headings that read ‘Mentioning of the reportage on the cause of...’ (Dhikr al-khabr an sabab...) one could infer that the function of akhbār is to provide a causal explanation of the key event under which they are listed. However, in the case of entry 193.7, which has as its key event the eruption of discord between Rashīd’s two sons, of the six akhbār included under the heading ‘Reportage on the cause of the discord between them’, at least three (2, 4 and 6) do not actually deal with the causes of the discord.

2. akhbār support the veracity of the key event

If akhbār do not deal with the causes of the key events, than we might suggest that they have been included to support the claim to veracity of the key events, as reports by eyewitnesses that actually were there when the key event took place. However, in order to buttress this truth claim, the akhbār themselves would have to appear very reliable. Yet in many instances such a khabar is juxtaposed with a report of the same event by another eyewitness that flatly contradicts the former. Now if anything sows doubt about the reliability of eyewitnesses it is the existence of mutually conflicting reports. Tabari’s primary narrator in no way helps his readers. He never voices a possible preference of one account over another and never pronounces an opinion on the relative reliability of accounts or reporters.

3. akhbār provide anecdotal illustrations of the key event

The problem of the inclusion of mutually conflicting akhbār would be solved if we do not see them as proof of historical exactness but rather
as ‘entertaining illustrations’. A mere list of key events would appear objective and scientific, but also provide a fairly dry read. By including *akhbār*, the seriousness of the key events is relieved with light and lively stories. These anecdotes have a higher aesthetic and entertaining value, but do not claim to be as true as the key events.

4. the key event is merely a heading under which to classify the *akhbār*

Perhaps we should not see the *akhbār* as subservient to the key event, but consider the key event as subservient to the *akhbār*. Maybe it is not the key events but the *akhbār* that constitute the main focus of the text. Perhaps Tabari was not primarily interested in reconstructing what actually happened, i.e. in the events themselves, but rather in the stories that were told about these events. Such an attitude would be another explanation of the inclusion of mutually conflicting *akhbār*. An event can only have happened in one possible way, but eyewitnesses can produce many different accounts of that event. If not the event itself, but these accounts are the main focus of interest, it pays off to include different versions.

This way we can approach the *Tārīkh* as a huge database of *akhbār*. Such a view is shared by Matthew L. Keegan, who recently stated that Tabari’s ‘History is a collection of khabar literature placed in a chronological framework.’ In order to make his *Tārīkh*, Tabari has collected all sound *akhbār* that deal with a broadly defined topic: past events of political and religious importance, with a particular focus on politically and religiously important characters: kings, prophets, and caliphs. To make this collection searchable, Tabari adopted a rigid system of classification. He chose to classify these *akhbār* not according to author, but according to subject matter. This way, *akhbār* dealing with the same event were grouped together into a single entry. Next, all entries dealing with events that took place in the same year were grouped into a single chapter. These year chapters were eventually arranged in chronological order.

Such catalogues or compendia are a widespread phenomenon of classical Arabic literature. All types of *akhbār* were collected and classified according to a variety of systems. *Akhbār* on dreams were gathered in dreambooks, sorted according to dream image and then arranged following a cosmological hierarchy. *Akhbār* on animals were collected

---

by al-Damiri in his Hayât al-hayawân al-kubrā, sorted according to animal and then arranged in alphabetical sequence.\textsuperscript{31} Authors of tabaqât works, or biographical dictionaries, collected akhbar on the members of certain professions, sorted them by main character and then classified these characters according to generation. Baladhuri, in his Ansâb al-ashraf, collected akhbar on past events that he sorted by topic (key event) and then arranged following a system based on tribal genealogy. Tabari also sorted akhbar by key event, but arranged them chronologically.

If we consider the Târîkh as a catalogue of akhbar, than the key events are nothing more than labels, search terms or key words that define the topic of an entry. At the same time, we can see in Table II on year chapter 193 that not all key events are followed by reports: some entries do not contain akhbar. However, the structure of a catalogue allows to add akhbar dealing with these key events in a later stage, without disrupting a larger narrative. In the words of Robinson: “The annalistic scheme can accommodate, accordion-like, as little or much material as the historian wishes to include.”\textsuperscript{32}

The Reticent Style of Tabari’s Primary Narrator

In conclusion, we can say that the primary narrator says very little. He restricts himself to voicing the introductory formula of each year chapter: (“Then the year x began”) and the following heading; the key events of the entries, and the headings inside the entries. The bulk of the Târîkh, the akhbar that make up the rest of the text, is put in the mouths of others.

When the primary narrator speaks at all, he does so in a dry, frugal style. He does not use comparison or metaphor, and he does not describe the appearance of characters, objects or scenery. He presents events apparently as plainly as possible:

- The primary narrator does not deviate from the strict chronological sequence of key events (to produce prolepses and analepses for example);
- Except for the chronological link that is provided by this strict chronological sequence, the primary narrator does not draw links between events or akhbar from different entries;

\textsuperscript{31} Ch. Pellat, ‘Mawsûa’, EI².
\textsuperscript{32} Robinson, p. 78.
- The primary narrator does not draw links between *akhbār* found within the same entry, except for the topical link provided by the key event of that entry (or the internal entry heading). Only the key event or the internal entry headings tell us explicitly that the *akhbār* of this entry or this section share a topical link;
- The primary narrator does not express commentary, judgment or interpretation on events: neither on the key events nor on the additional events presented in the *akhbār*.
- He does not comment upon or interpret the *akhbār* he quotes; he does not (or only very rarely) pronounce judgment on their veracity, or on the reliability of their transmitters. When *akhbār* flatly contradict each other, the primary narrator does not state which *khabar* he deems the more reliable.
- In short, the primary narrator does not tell stories, except when he presents the short series of events that make up a larger key event.

A modern audience expects that an historian explains the relationships between events, that he interprets why they happened, and that he passes judgement on the reliability of his sources. Therefore, this absence of any *direct, explicit* judgment or interpretation by the primary narrator, and the inclusion of variant accounts of the same event has puzzled and one could say almost exasperated Tabari’s modern readers, as we have also seen in chapter one. Tarif Khalidi, in his *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (1994), commenting on the annalistic part of the *Tārīkh* that we analyzed here:

> There is no trace in this whole portion of the History of any explicit judgement on men or events nor any speculation on the course or significance of events...The annalistic scheme was perhaps a natural one to select for the Hijri era and the scheme itself had already been adopted by the historians of the third/ninth century...More difficult to explain, however, is the almost total absence of any comments on the veracity of reports or any moral verdict on events of momentous consequence for the Muslim community.33

**CONVENTIONS OF RETICENCE**

Why is the primary narrator of Tabari’s *Tārīkh* so reticent? Why does he speak so little in his own words, and why does he refrain from explicitly judging events and characters? Some scholars have suggested that Tabari styled his *Tārīkh* after the format of ḥadīth collections, because he wanted to raise historiography to the level of the respected science of

33 Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*, p. 80.
Prophetic tradition. While it is true that the Tārīkh shares structural qualities with a hadith collection, this explanation is not satisfactory. Firstly, the formal elements that the Tārīkh shares with a compendium of hadith (a reticent primary narrator, the use of isnād, and the inclusion of contradictory accounts of the same event) can be found in most official genres of classical Arabic prose, even when we admit that Tabari was somewhat more thorough in mentioning isnads than other authors. Secondly, pointing to a resemblance between the Tārīkh and hadith collections only postpones the problem, for it does not answer the question why hadith collections were given such a format in the first place. More positive approaches are the following:

1. disdain for fiction

By letting his primary narrator say so little, by not providing links between events and by putting most of the words in the mouth of others, Tabari appears as someone who himself does not tell a story. He had to create this impression because telling a story about events one did not personally witness was seen to lead inexorably towards invention or fiction. Now the use of fiction, in any prose genre, was frowned upon by the critics of official literary production, as it was associated with lying and deceit.

The disdain of boldly imaginative narration, the general demand for truthfulness even for stories which serve the purpose of amusement, as well as the distrust against the literary tradition of marvellous tales evince the endeavour to banish the imaginary from the literature which serves education and mediates knowledge.

54 Khalidi, p. 74; Carter, p. 140, but see the critique against this view in Keegan, pp. 5, 10, 19, 21.
55 Beaumont, p. 29.
For someone whose main task was to convey reliable information about the past, storytelling, with its associations of fiction and hence lies, was completely out of bounds.

2. scientific objectivity

In the second place, the dry, detached style of the primary narrator makes him appear scientifically objective. He appears as someone who relies on evidence, such as eyewitness accounts and documents, instead of someone who is under the influence of personal preconceptions and ideologies, or who gets carried away by literary embellishment and a flowery style. The primary narrator is a scientist, not a raconteur. The catalogue format of the Tārīkh, with its associations of rigid classification, comprehensiveness and exactitude, adds to this scientific appearance.

3. political neutrality

Thirdly, the fact that the primary narrator abstains from explicitly judging historical characters and their actions, makes him appear politically neutral. Many of the events of Islamic history, especially those of the Rāshidūn era, were controversial and had divided Muslims up to the point of schism and civil war. According to Stephen Humphreys:

\[
\text{If a would-be historian spoke about these matters in his own words, he would inevitably be regarded as no serious scholar but as a mere propagandist for one or another faction. For an historian to be accepted as an objective transmitter of reliable facts about these religiously sensitive events, he had to disclaim personal responsibility for the statements in his works.}^{38}\ \text{Scholarly authority required a talent for self-effacement.}^{39}
\]

In the case of Abbasid caliphs, under whose reign Tabari composed his Tārīkh, direct criticism of one of these rulers could be read as an attack on the legitimacy of the dynasty as a whole, and understood by some readers as a provocative call for armed revolt.

---

38 Humphreys, Islamic History, p. 74.
39 Humphreys, ‘Ta’rīkh’, EP.
4. piety

In the fourth place, refraining from explicitly judging characters and from proposing possible causes of events also made the primary narrator appear pious. Only God knows the causes of events, and only God can offer final judgment on the actions of his worshippers. Human beings, with their imperfect knowledge, should not have the arrogance to perform God’s task.

In general, the norms of a Muslim historian’s audience seem to have been opposed to the obvious use of human reason to explain what could and should only be explained according to divine will. Many writers shared these norms and felt guilty about seeming to transgress them; other writers reject the audience’s norms on this and other matters but felt compelled to pay lip service to them...

For all these reasons Muslim histories on the surface often have an air of objectivity and equanimity that has misled many modern critics.

5. respect of tradition

In the fifth place, the fact that the primary narrator is so modest with his own words and so generously hands the floor to the earlier narrators and transmitters of *akhbār*, makes him appear respectful of tradition. Later generations were not supposed to base their knowledge of the past on the active use of their own reason, but merely on the contemplation of the words of eyewitnesses to these earlier events, as they had been handed down by tradition. Humphreys comments on the style of the later compilers such as Tabari:

I would prefer to connect their apparent diffidence not to pious modesty or arid objectivity, but rather to the concept of knowledge in early Islamic culture. In this milieu, the historian’s proper task was to convey objective knowledge of those past events which were generally believed to possess legal, political, or religious significance. Such knowledge (‘ilm) consisted of accounts of these events which could be traced back to reliable authorities—in the ideal case, eyewitnesses of known veracity, but in any case reputable early scholars who had obtained their information from such persons. The historian’s task was decisively not to interpret or to evaluate the past as such; rather, he was simply to determine which reports about it (akhbār) were acceptable and to compile these reports in a convenient order.

---


41 Humphreys, *Islamic History*, p. 74, my italics; see also Khalidi, p. 25; Robinson, p. 85; p. 89.
Such a case for the preference of tradition over reason is made in the text of the *Tārīkh* itself. In an oft-quoted passage from the introduction to the work, the primary narrator states as his main objective: ‘ilm bi-mā kāna min akhbār al-mādīn. Tabari’s primary narrator claims here to be interested not in knowledge of ‘the past as such’ (Humphreys), i.e. the events of the past, but knowledge of reports, told by the people who witnessed these events. This claim is another argument for the thesis that Tabari wanted to give his *Tārīkh* the appearance of a catalogue of akhbār. The primary narrator goes on to explain that knowledge of such reports cannot be obtained by the use of reason. Rational deduction alone cannot reconstruct what people we never met could possibly have said, let alone judge the truthfulness of their words. There are only two ways by which someone can know exactly what other people have said and at the same time judge their reliability as informants:

1. When he has known them personally and has talked with them face-to-face, for which his lifetime has to have overlapped with theirs;
2. When he obtains a verbatim quotation of what they have said which has been handed down by a process of oral, *hadith*-style transmission by professional transmitters, a process that is supposed to guarantee the truthfulness of the original eyewitness, the transmitters in the chain, and the transmitted statement.

I rely only on what has been transmitted to me: the akhbār that I have included in [this book] and the traditions that I have ascribed by name to their transmitters. I do not rely on what is learned through rational arguments or deduced by the human mind, save to a very limited degree. For knowledge of [the content and reliability of] the akhbār that were told by eyewitnesses in the past—and the same goes for reports that are told by current eyewitnesses today—cannot be obtained by someone who did not live in the same time as these witnesses and met them face-to-face, except through one channel: oral transmission by professional traditionists. Knowledge of [the content and reliability of] such eyewitness reports cannot be brought out by reason or produced by mental deduction.
There is an additional reason behind this reverence for the sayings of ancestors, besides the assumption that they had witnessed past events with their own eyes. The older generations, that were closer in time to Muhammad, were deemed to be fundamentally wiser and of sounder judgement than the younger generations. It would have been hubristic for a later historian to try to improve on the rendering of events by these revered authorities. In the words of Tarif Khalidi, traditionalist historians were:

...animated by an essentially conservative spirit which tended to view the past as a process of steady decline and their own days as inferior in morality and knowledge to the days of Muhammad and of his four ‘rightly guided’ successors....In passing on the wisdom of ancestors these scholars believed that they were transmitters rather than creators.43

Compilers such as Tabari had to preserve the words of these ancestors intact, as the last relics of a golden past. 'Every opinion, every voice which could be added to his collection reinforced the community of believers by the weight of authority as a witness of the Islamic past and a part of it.'44

6. feigned orality

In the sixth place, the paucity of comments by the primary narrator himself, and his emphasis on direct discourse and on detailed chains of transmitters, could also be due to an apparent respect for orality. More important than the writing of a book by a single author was the continuous process of oral transmission by a community of transmitters. By publishing his Tārīkh, Tabari did nothing more than provide a snapshot of this process, a reference tool that allowed its participants or observers to keep track of it, and gave them an overview of the state of affairs of oral transmission in their own time. Just as a photographer captures one moment of a continuous and three-dimensional process in a flat image, Tabari freezes one moment of a continuous process of face-to-face communication between large numbers of transmitters in a single written text.

According to this view, the scarce words uttered by the primary narrator are nothing but the framework for an orderly classification of

43 Khalidi, p. 25, my italics.
the units of this process of oral transmission, the akhbār. Robinson speaks in this context of the 'tension between an ever-expanding corpus of akhbār material' and 'narrative frameworks engineered to contain and order it.'

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, simply listing the conventions of Tabari’s time that called for reticence on the part of the historian is unsatisfactory, for it presents Tabari as the passive victim to these conventions and does not explain why he chose to adhere to them. Here, therefore, a new element will be added to the discussion by arguing that Tabari chose to comply with these restrictions for rhetorical effect, that is to enhance the convincing power of his text.

Tabari knows that readers will be inclined to identify him with his primary narrator. Style and structure of the Tārīkh make its primary narrator (and hence Tabari) appear not only as truthful, scientifically objective and politically neutral, but also as modest, pious, and respectful of tradition and orality. Style and structure are chosen to make the author appear more authoritative as a purveyor of reliable information about the past, and hence more convincing in the instances that he does pass judgment.

What Constitutes a Story?

The fact that the primary narrator abstains from drawing explicit connections between the events of different entries raises the question whether he tells a story that supersedes the structure of a single entry. Does he only catalogue, or does the sequence of (some of) these entries taken together form a story? According to the definition given by the narratologist Mieke Bal, a story is a series of chronologically and logically related events which is presented in a certain manner. This definition implies that the presentation of a series of events which are only chronologically—but not logically—related, is not actually a story, or is, at least, an incomplete story. In other words, as long as the events are only chronologically related, their presentation cannot form a story.

However, as is noted by Bal’s colleague Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, many readers are easily tempted to supplement the missing logical link themselves, thereby turning the presentation of a number of subse-

---

45 Robinson, p. 24; see also pp. 171-7.
quent events into a story. ‘Stories may be based on an implicit application of the logical error *post hoc, ergo propter hoc.*’

Let us stick for the moment to Bal’s definition and say that a list of events without explicit causal relationships between them is not a complete story, but an implicit one: it is up to the reader to turn it into a complete story by suggesting a causal link. In the case of the *Tārīkh*, however, it is sometimes hard to suggest a logical relation between two subsequent entries, as they might concern completely different characters—some of which are mentioned only once in the entire *Tārīkh* —and take place at different places. Take for example, two subsequent entries from the year 192:

In this year, the judge Ali al-Zabyan died at Qasr al-Lusus.
In this year, Yahya b. Mu’adh brought (the Syrian rebel) Abu al-Nida to al-Rashid whilst the latter was at al-Raqqa, and al-Rashid had him killed.

Although the second entry consists of two related events which make up a small story of its own, the two entries taken together do not form a story: the narrator does not establish a logical relation between them, and the reader has no clue to supplement a logical relation himself. Even if subsequent entries concern the same character, they are not always easily interpreted as forming a story, as in the sequence: In this year, al-Rashīd killed X; In this year, al-Rashīd raided Byzantine territory; In this year, al-Rashīd appointed Y.

Strictly speaking, therefore, the primary narrator does not narrate: he sums up events without establishing a logical relation between them, and he cites secondary narrators.

**Dreams and Implicit Storytelling**

We started this chapter with the question how to translate the term *tārīkh* in the title of Tabari’s work. Is it a full history, a mere list of events, or a catalogue? After a closer look at the narrative structure of this text, it appears to have aspects of all these options.

---


48 Tab. III, 732.
Tabari’s Tārīkh = Chronological list of past events

Because the key events of the Tārīkh are presented in such a rigid chronological order and are nowhere accompanied by explicit commentary, judgement or interpretation, one could say that this text is nothing more than a chronological list of events. According to this reading, Tabari’s sole objective was to provide his readers answers to questions of relative and exact chronology: In what sequence did events take place? In what year took a given event place? What events took place during a given year? According to this reading, the term tārīkh can simply be translated as ‘chronology’.

Tabari’s Tārīkh = Chronological list of the reigns of rulers

Because various titles given to Tabari’s work speak of rasul ‘prophets’, mulūk ‘rulers, kings’ and khulafā‘caliphs’, rulers and their reigns appear to constitute the main focus of Tabari’s interest. His main objective is to provide his readers with the dates on which rulers came to power and on which they were succeeded by other rulers. It is true that he mentions some of the events that took place during their reigns, but he says that these can only be summarized. As noted above, when speaking of the rulers that form the subject of his work, Tabari’s primary narrators states in his introduction:

Every one of them whom I shall mention in this book of mine will be mentioned in conjunction with his time but (only) summaries of the events of his day and age will be added...This will be combined with references to the length of their natural life and the time of their death.

There are also structural arguments to consider the reigns of rulers and their chronological sequence as the main focus of Tabari’s work: the ‘regnal chapters’ found in the Islamic part, as well as the extensive obituary entries devoted to each ruler that conclude these regnal chapters.

This way, the Tārīkh would have been created to answer questions such as: From what year to what year reigned this or that ruler? In what sequence did they rule? What are the events that happened to take place during their reigns? According to this reading, tārīkh is a synonym to mawālīd and simply means ‘dates’.
Tabari's Tārīkh = Catalogue of akhbār on past events

Other elements of the text foreground the catalogue aspect of Tabari's work: the Tārīkh as a database of akhbār, where eyewitness reports are the main focus, not the events behind them. In the first place, akhbār make up the bulk of the text. Secondly, most headings contain the word khabr, ‘report’ or ‘reportage’, such as Dhikr al-khabr ‘an mā kāna fīhā min al-ahdāth or Dhikr al-khabr ‘an sabab…, implying that the reportage is at least as important as the events. The juxtaposition of akhbār that tell conflicting stories of the same event is also more logical when the akhbār, not the events are main focus. Moreover, some of the titles given to the work specifically mention that it is about akhbār and anbā/. Tabari’s primary narrator states in his introduction that his main objective is ‘ilm bi-mā kāna min akhbār al-māḏīn, ‘knowledge of the akhbār that were told by eyewitnesses in the past.’

This way, Tabari’s goal was to provide his readers a complete overview of all circulating akhbār that dealt with the broad topic of past political and religious events. Readers could use his database as a reference tool to obtain answers to questions as: What is the exact wording of a particular khabar? What sound akhbār on a specific event are in circulation? According to this reading, the word tārīkh in the title refers to the fact that Tabari chose to order his akhbār following a chronological classification. We could see the work as a Tārikhu l-akhbāri, ‘a chronology of akhbār’, i.e. a catalogue of chronologically arranged reports.

Tabari’s Tārīkh = Story about past events

Can such a list of events, or such a database of the works of others, also tell a story of its own? Marylin Waldman, a narratologist who studied classical Islamic historiography agrees that annalistic works such as Tabari’s do not constitute a complete story. ‘Full narrativity’ involves, among other things, ‘explicit comments on the connections between events.49 She states, however, that ‘we cannot assume that a text like this one tells no story because it does not make its story fully explicit, formally organized and finished.’50 Elements of the listing strategy such as ordering, juxtaposition, selection, association, and omission, are used to tell ‘implicit stories’.

50 Waldman, p. 786.
The rest of this thesis will be devoted to arguing that Tabari tells such implicit stories. In the following chapters I will focus on one of these ways to implicitly connect events: association, in this case association by way of recurrent narrative motifs. In chapter three, I will analyse how motifs derived from the Bible recur throughout the pre-Islamic part of the Tārīkh. Focussing on motifs related to a particular type of dream that involves the confrontation between a pagan tyrant and an Abrahamic oneiromantic, I will show how motif repetition is used to draw implicit comparisons between episodes that are hundreds of pages apart. Chapters four to six focus on the early Abbasid caliphs. In chapters four and five I will analyse how the same biblical motifs discussed in chapter three are also used in the Islamic section of the Tārīkh, to implicitly judge caliphs and their actions. Here not only association, but also juxtaposition will be discussed as one of the ways to tell an ‘implicit story’. In the sixth chapter I will show how predictive dreams add suspense and tragedy to the apparently dry presentation of events. Our final conclusion will be that in the case of Tabari’s text, we can indeed translate the term tārīkh as ‘story about past events’, i.e. as ‘history’ in the full sense of the word.

THE LIST AND CATALOGUE FORMATS AS RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

All the aspects of the Tārīkh that at first view puzzle and irritate the modern reader, such as the dry summary of events, the absence of full narrativity, the reticent style of the primary narrator, the inclusion of contradictory akhbār, and the absence of explicit connections between events, do not spring from the fact that Tabari was unimaginative, afraid of the Hanbalites, or was severely handicapped by the conventions of his time. Tabari chose to give his Tārīkh the format of a catalogue as a rhetorical strategy.

To appear more authoritative in the eyes of his contemporaries, he pretended not to draw comparisons between events, not to explain their causes, not to have added embellishments such as metaphor, suspense, tragedy or irony. He went out his way not to appear as a storyteller. To achieve this, he not only hides behind his narrators, but also behind the catalogue format of his collection. However, as the ambiguity of the term tārīkh indicates, Tabari can have it both ways. Tabari’s Tārīkh is not either a list or a catalogue or a story; it is all of these at the same time. Hiding behind the catalogue structure Tabari can pose as a

51 Hoyland, p. 22.
modest, objective and neutral collector, and at the same time tell a captivating story, that highlights seminal events, chooses sides and offers scathing judgements on the legitimacy of rulers.

*Dreams as an ideal tool for implicit storytelling*

In the remaining part of this thesis I will argue that for Tabari’s purpose, i.e. remaining within the conventions of classical Arabic historiography while at the same time telling a story, an ideal tool is provided by dreams. In other words, dreams are perfectly suited for *implicit* storytelling.

As I will argue in chapter four, dreams provide a perfect instrument by which the author can offer his opinion or cast judgment indirectly. In the case that dreams occur in the *Tārīkh*, the primary narrator quotes an eyewitness who in turn quotes a character who reports an event he witnessed: the dreamer recounts a dream he saw. In case the dream is explained, the eyewitness quotes an additional character (the dream interpreter) who translates the dream’s message. No one here states an opinion: not the primary narrator, not the eyewitness, not the characters. The dreamer reports an event he witnessed in his sleep, the interpreter simply translates what others saw; he hides behind the dreamer. This way, the author himself can hide behind at least five figureheads: his primary narrator, the *khabar* transmitters, the eyewitness, the interpreter, and the dreamer.

However, at the same time that this indirect judgment is hidden under so many layers, it is also *heavily foregrounded*. Dreams cry out to be noted and interpreted by the reader. When the contents of a dream are recounted, the reader knows that these contents constitute a message, a message that needs to be interpreted, and an important one at that, as dreams come from the supernatural realm.

In addition, the judgment offered by dreams is also *highly authoritative*. An account of a dream or its deciphering by a professional interpreter was not seen as the expression of a subjective, human opinion, but as an objective account of an event that actually took place. Not a single classical Arabic author ever expressed doubt on the existence of truthful dreams. The immense literature on dreams, from philosophical treatises to works of oneirocriticism, provided their interpretation with an aura of scientific objectivity. Dreams were related to prophecy; they were messages send by God himself, and therefore expressions of His infallible judgment.
Finally, dreams, as a type of prediction, are eminently suited, not only to *indirectly highlight* events but also, as *prolepsis*, to provide *connections between different events*. 
Tyrant Dreamer vs. Abrahamic Interpreter

At the beginning of his eight-thousand-page Tārīkh, on page 389 to be exact, Tabari relates a story that is well known to Muslim as well as Jewish and Christian readers, as it is found in both the Koran and the Old Testament. It is the famous story of how the ruler of Egypt dreamed of seven fat cows that came out of the Nile, started grazing and were devoured by seven lean cows. None of the king’s diviners, in fact no one in the whole of Egypt, is able to interpret this dream, until one of the courtiers remembers someone who had been forgotten in the king’s prison, not an Egyptian, but a foreigner, a slave from a people of herdsmen. This prisoner is Joseph, descendant of Abraham, to whom God had promised that all of his offspring would be His chosen people. Joseph succeeds where all the king’s helpers failed, and interprets the dream: it announces seven years of abundance followed by seven years of drought. As a result of this interpretation, the king is full of respect for the wisdom and beliefs of Joseph and his people of herdsmen. The former slave and convict is made viceroy of Egypt. Two thousand years and almost twelve hundred pages later, Tabari presents his reader with a story about another Near Eastern ruler, the
Byzantine emperor Heraclius, which is set in the year 6 H. (AD 627), so six years after the prophet Muhammad had migrated from Mecca to Medina and founded the first Islamic community. This Christian ruler Heraclius also has a dream: he is shown that the ‘kingdom of circumcision’ will be victorious. Like the Egyptian diviners, the emperor’s advisors fail in interpreting this dream: they suggest that the kingdom of circumcision must refer to the Jews, and, to prevent the prediction from coming true, suggest Heraclius to kill all of them. The emperor, however, keeps his head clear. When a messenger from the Arabs, a people of herdsmen, arrives at his court, Heraclius orders this man to be stripped of his clothes, and behold, the man is circumcised. When the Christian emperor hears about a prophet by the name of Muhammad who has arisen among the people of this messenger, he is among the first to recognize the authenticity of his prophethood, and foresees that the Arab Muslims will conquer parts of his empire.

Although these two dreams are presented to have been dreamt two thousand years apart, and are separated from each other by an interval of twelve hundred pages of text, they share some common elements and a common structure. Two non-Islamic rulers have a dream that predicts havoc to their kingdoms but which their advisors fail to interpret. The key to their dream’s interpretation lies in a member from a foreign people of herdsmen, either Jew or Arab, in short: a descendant of Abraham. As a result of the dream or its interpretation, the ruler is full of respect for the beliefs and wisdom of this people. Its members make a remarkable rise to fortune: Joseph becomes the second most important man in Egypt, the Arabs rise from desert nomads to rulers of the Near East.

There are, of course, also differences between the two episodes: not everything has remained the same in the course of the centuries. In the first episode it is the foreign Abrahamite, Joseph, who interprets the ruler’s dream, whereas in the last episode, the foreign Abrahamite who was stripped of his clothes only functions as an additional hint that helps the ruler to decipher his own dream. To this shift in the roles of the two main characters, ruler and interpreter, we will come back in the conclusion to this chapter.

Because it is unfeasible to treat all the dreams found in the Tārikh, I will focus here on a specific type of dream that recurs several times in Tabari’s text: a pre-Islamic ruler has a dream that no one can interpret except for a member of a foreign people. (This people descends from Abraham, they are either Jew or Arab.) One of the benefits of studying
this type of dream is that it will allow me to treat an entire cluster of
dream-related motifs, which also recur elsewhere in the Tārikh.

The particular ruler dream I will analyse here is found six times in
the Tārikh: the dream by the king of Egypt in the time of Joseph, a
dream by Pharaoh in the days of Moses, and four more dreams by re-
spectively the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar, the Yemenite king
Rabī‘a b. Naṣr, the Persian emperor Anūsharwān and the Byzantine em-
peror Heraclius. All these dreams are found in the pre-Islamic part of
the Tārikh, except for the last one, which is included in the annalistic
part under the year 6 H. This last dream by Heraclius shares, however, a
major theme with the five preceding dreams. Those of Pharaoh, Nebu-
chadnezzar and Rabī‘a b. Naṣr announce the coming of Islam, while
Anūsharwān’s dream announces the conquest of the Persian empire by
the Muslims. Likewise, Heraclius’ dream predicts the Muslim conquest
of parts of the Byzantine empire.

Two of these six ruler dreams are also found in the Bible: the dream
of the king of Egypt about the seven fat and seven lean kine, which is
interpreted by Joseph, and the dream of Nebuchadnezzar about the
statue which is interpreted by Daniel. The dream of the king of Egypt is
also found in the Koran.

THE GENERAL STRUCTURE OF THE 'TYRANT VS. INTERPRETER' DREAM
AND ITS RELATED MOTIFS

In the interval between the Egyptian king’s dream of the kine and Hera-
clius’ dream of circumcision, the ‘tyrant vs. interpreter’ dream takes on
its most commonly found shape. The general structure of this type of
dream is as follows:

An infidel tyrant has a dream that disturbs him. He gathers all
his professional diviners, but not one of them is able to inter-
pret it. The only person who can make sense of the dream is a
foreigner, a descendant of Abraham who believes in one God.
This foreigner reveals that the dream foretells the end of the
tyrant’s reign and the coming of a righteous ruler, who is also
one of the descendants of Abraham, and who will found a king-
dom of God that will last forever.

Several narrative motifs can occur in combination with this type of
dream:
- The morning after the dream, the tyrant is alarmed.

This motif is expressed by a formula:

**Bible:**
- Pharaoh: 'In the morning his mind was troubled'
- Nebuchadnezzar: 'His mind was troubled and he could not sleep.'

**Ṭārīkh:**
- the king of Egypt: raʾ ā ruʾ yā ḥālathu 'He had a dream which terrified him.'
- Nebuchadnezzar: qad a jābihu mā raʾ ā 'What he dreamt disturbed him.'
- Rabīʾā b. Naṣr: raʾ ā ruʾ yā ḥālathu wa faṣ'ā biḥā 'He had a dream that alarmed him and continued to disquiet him.'
- Anūsharwān: fa-lamma aṣbaha Kisrā aṣṣaʾahu mā raʾ ā 'When he woke up, Kisrā was affrighted by what he had dreamt.'
- Heraclius: aṣbaha dhāt al-ghadāt mahmūman 'He arose troubled one morning.'

- The tyrant summons his diviners to interpret his dream.

This motif is expressed by a formula:

**Bible:**
- Pharaoh: 'So he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt.'
- Nebuchadnezzar: 'So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed.'
- Herod: 'When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law...'

**Ṭārīkh:**
- the king of Egypt: Fa-jamaʾ a al-saḥara wa-l-kaḥina wa-l-hāẓṣa wa-l-qāfa 'He assembled his magicians, soothsayers, diviners, and prognosticators.'
- Pharaoh: Fa-daʾ ā al-saḥara wa-l-kaḥina wa-l-qāfa wa-l-hāẓṣa 'He called for the magicians, soothsayers, prognosticators and diviners.'
- Rabīʾā b. Naṣr: Fa-lam yadaʾ kāhinan wa-lā sāḥira wa-lā′ aṣṣāfān wa-lā muṣāfin ilā jamaʾahu ilayhi 'He sent out enquiries among the people of his kingdom and gathered together in his presence every soothsayer, magician, drawer of omens from the flight of birds and astrologer.'
- Anūsharwān: wuzarāʾ uhu wa-maṣāḥbatu hu 'His ministers and marzūbāns'
- Heraclius: baṭūriqatu hu wa-ashraf al-Rūm 'His military commanders and the nobles of the Romans'

- The tyrant orders his diviners to tell him what he has dreamt.
- The tyrant threatens to kill his diviners if they fail.
- The diviners are unable to tell the tyrant what he has dreamt or to interpret his dream.
- Someone at the tyrant’s court remembers an Abrahamite foreigner skilled in dream interpretation who is brought in from the outside.
- The foreigner succeeds where the diviners failed, and predicts that:
  - harm will be done to the tyrant and his people;
  - the tyrant’s rule will end;
  - an Abrahamite prophet will replace the tyrant;
- this prophet and his offspring will rule until the end of time.

- Two opposite and mutually exclusive reactions by the tyrant to this prediction are found:

1. The tyrant is full of respect for the wisdom and beliefs of the interpreter and his people:
   - he appoints the interpreter as ruler over parts of his own kingdom;
   - he admits that the religion of the interpreter is the best of all religions.

2. The tyrant tries to avert the coming of the prophet by killing the newborn boys of the Abrahamites.

In the second case, the tyrant’s pre-emptive actions are to no avail. The prophet that was foretold survives and replaces the tyrant as ruler over his kingdom.

After interpreting Pharaoh’s dream, Joseph is appointed supreme commander of Egypt (Genesis 41:40). *Bijbelsche Historiën*, 30.
Table III: Recurring Expressions in the Tyrant vs. Interpreter Dream Episodes

From top to bottom: Sequence of episodes in Bible and Tārīkh
From left to right: Sequence of expressions in each episode

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tyrant</th>
<th>Interpreter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bible</strong></td>
<td><strong>Tārīkh</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pharaoh</strong></td>
<td><strong>The king of Egypt</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘In the morning his mind was troubled...’</td>
<td>‘He had a dream which terrified him.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘...so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt...’</td>
<td>‘...and told them about the dream.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pharaoh</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nebuchadnezzar</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Pharaoh then summoned the wise men and sorcerers’ (Ex. 7:11).</td>
<td>‘...So the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers...’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nebuchadnezzar</strong></td>
<td><strong>Herod</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Wise Men from the East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘His mind was troubled and he could not sleep...’</td>
<td>‘When King Herod heard this he was disturbed.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘...to tell him what he had dreamed.’</td>
<td>‘When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law...’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Herod</strong></td>
<td><strong>The king of Egypt</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wise Men</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law...’</td>
<td>‘The king assembled his magicians, soothsayers, diviners, and prognosticators...’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The king of Egypt</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nebuchadnezzar</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘He called for the magicians, soothsayers, prognosticators and diviners...’</td>
<td>‘...and asked them about his dream.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Pharaoh immediately sent throughout his domain and did not leave a single magician under his rule whom he did not have brought’ (Tab. I, 472).</td>
<td>‘Tell us about it that we might let you know its interpretation.’ He said, ‘I do not remember.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nebuchadnezzar</strong></td>
<td><strong>Rabi’a b. Naṣr</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Saṭṭih and Shiqq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘He saw a dream that perturbed him.’</td>
<td>‘...When he had this dream, he sent out enquiries among the people of his kingdom and gathered together in his presence every soothsayer, magician, drawer of omens from the flight of birds and astrologer...’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘He summoned Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael.’</td>
<td>‘...Then he informed them, “I have had a dream...so tell me its interpretation.”’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rabi’a b. Naṣr</strong></td>
<td><strong>Anūsharwān</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saṭṭih and Shiqq</td>
<td>Saṭṭih</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘He had a dream that alarmed him and continued to disquiet him...’</td>
<td>‘His ministers and marzubāns...and gathered them around him. When they were all gathered around him...’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘...Then he informed them, “I have had a dream...so tell me its interpretation.”’</td>
<td>‘...he told them why he had sent for them... “Send to me a man who is knowledgeable about what I wish to ask him,”’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anūsharwān</strong></td>
<td><strong>Heraclius</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saṭṭih</td>
<td>Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘When he woke up, Kisrā was affrighted by what he had dreamt.’</td>
<td>‘He arose troubled one morning, turning his gaze to the sky...’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘His ministers and marzubāns...and gathered them around him. When they were all gathered around him...’</td>
<td>‘...His military commanders and the nobles of the Romans...’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are three main characters in this type of dream: the tyrant, his diviners, and the interpreter.

*The Tyrant*

The tyrant, full of worldly might, is evil, blind and arrogant. His tyranny appears from several of his actions: he gives his diviners a command which is humanly impossible to fulfil: to tell their ruler what he has dreamt; he threatens to kill them if they fail; and finally, to avert his dream from coming true, he commits genocide on innocent children. The fact that the tyrant does not want to accept his destiny is a sign of his arrogance. The extreme scale of his actions—summon all the diviners in his realm to interpret one dream, kill all the newborn Abrahamite boys to prevent a single one of them from growing up—is a sign of the tyrant’s might. At the same time, these extreme actions emphasize the weakness of his worldly powers in the face of God and destiny, and render the tyrant’s eventual downfall even more poignant.

*The Diviners*

The tyrant’s diviners are incapable: they are unable to reveal to their ruler what his dream means, either because they simply do not understand it, or because they do not dare to tell their ruler the truth, out of fear of being punished for bringing bad news.

*The Interpreter*

The interpreter is the opposite of both tyrant and diviners. Where the tyrant is the sovereign over a large sedentary empire, with thousands of subjects at his command, the interpreter is on his own, a foreigner in the tyrant’s realm. Where the diviners fail and act cowardly, the single interpreter succeeds and dares to speak the terrible truth to the tyrant in the presence of all his advisors. While the tyrant and his advisors are blind pagans, the interpreter believes in one God and sees the truth. The tyrant’s eventual downfall mirrors the ascension of the interpreter and his people.

In the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter’ dream, there is a clear-cut opposition between good (the interpreter) and evil (the tyrant). The interpreter is the hero, who starts as the underdog: he is from a humble background, his people are shepherds, he himself might even be a slave or a prisoner. The tyrant starts as his arch-enemy: unjust and all-powerful, he uses his worldly might to oppress the interpreter and his peo-
ple. Single-handedly, however, the underdog interpreter is able to succeed where all the tyrant’s helpers failed, and consequently wins the tyrant’s respect, or defeats him.

The fact that the monotheist interpreter succeeds where the pagan diviners fail, suggests that dream interpretation is superior to other forms of divination, such as those practiced by pagan sorcerers or astrologers. Moreover, correct interpretation of dreams is not just a question of exceptional human intelligence, it is a prophetic, God-given skill. The quintessential biblical interpreters of dreams, Joseph and Daniel, receive their interpretations directly from God\textsuperscript{109}, and whereas Daniel is a prophet already in the Bible, Joseph is one of the major prophets of Islam.

At a certain moment in the development of the ‘tyrant vs. interpreter’ dream, such as it is sketched below, this interpreter with prophetic skills will split up into two distinct characters: an Abrahamite interpreter and an Abrahamite prophet, whose coming is announced by the interpreter. It is the prophet, rather than the interpreter, to whom the attention will shift and who will become the true hero of the story. It is the prophet’s rise from misery—born in a stable, misunderstood by his fellow tribesmen—to greatness which will provide the mirror image to the tyrant’s demise.

The following analysis of the six times this type of dream and its related motifs are repeated will provide an example of the repetition of narrative motifs in general and dreams in particular throughout the text of the \textit{Tārīkh}. At the same time, my analysis of the reception of the two biblical dreams of this type in Tabari’s text will provide an example of the general reception of biblical material in the \textit{Tārīkh}.

In this chapter, I will proceed as follows: I will compare these six dreams of tyrants from the \textit{Tārīkh} with each other and with their biblical models. As I will show, each time this type of dreams recurs, a new selection is made from a cluster of related motifs and each time the selected motifs are combined in a different fashion. In the course of this comparison, I will interpret the effects of the repetition of (such a cluster of) narrative motifs within the text of the \textit{Tārīkh}, as well as the ef-

\textsuperscript{109} Genesis 41:15-6: ‘Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I had a dream, and no-one can interpret it. But I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.” “I cannot do it,” Joseph replied to Pharaoh, “but God will give Pharaoh the answer he desires.” \textit{Holy Bible: New International Version} (The International Bible Society, 1984).
Effects of the reception of biblical material (stories, motifs and themes) in Tabari’s chronicle.

Effects of the reception of biblical material in the Tārīkh

Dreams by rulers that only a foreigner can interpret, and the various narrative motifs related to this type of dream, can be found in many stories and in a variety of cultures. To us, and probably also to Tabari’s audience, the most famous examples of this kind of dream are found in the Bible, or in a biblical context, i.e. in Jewish, Christian or Islamic legends about biblical characters. In the Tārīkh, the dream of the king of Egypt interpreted by Joseph and the dream of Nebuchadnezzar interpreted by Daniel are obvious references to the Old Testament. The fact that Tabari incorporated biblical material—not only motifs, but also themes and entire episodes—into his Tārīkh is nothing new. In this chapter, however, I will try to analyse the effects of this reuse of biblical material.

When a narrator reuses motifs from an older text, this induces his readers not only to compare the work they are reading with that older text, but also to compare the characters and events from the work they are reading with those of the older text. The reuse of motifs (as well as broader themes and entire episodes) from the Bible in Tabari’s chronicle, has therefore two effects: The readers are led to consider the Tārīkh as a text comparable to the Bible, as being of the same standing as the Old and New Testaments, indeed as a sequel to it. The events that occurred since the coming of Islam are presented as a continuation of the

110 Two examples from al-Andalus, that feature, like the Heraclius episode, all three monotheist religions: In his Kitāb al-Khazarī, Jehuda Halevi tells the story of the ruler of the Khazars who is ordered in a dream to live according to God’s will. To find out how exactly God wants him to live, the ruler invites a philosopher, a Christian, a Muslim and a Jew to his court. In the end, the Khazar ruler and his people convert to Judaism, the faith of the foreigner who gave the best interpretation of the ruler’s dream. Juda Hallevi, Kitab al-Khazari: Translated from the Arabic with an Introduction by Hartwig Hirschfeld (London: Routledge, 1905).

The Castilian King Alfonso has a dream that his priests and monks fail to interpret, so he asks a Jew to relate this dream to a Muslim interpreter, who predicts that Alfonso will be defeated by the Muslims at the battle of Zallāqa. Maqārī, Naft al-tīb min ghāṣn al-Andalus al-raqīb, ed. Ihsān ʿAbbās (Bayrūt: Dār ʿĀdir, 1968) IV, p. 363. (I thank Bart Wallet and Arie Schippers for bringing these stories under my attention). Other examples in: R. Gnuse, ‘The Jewish Dream Interpreter in a Foreign Court: The Recurrent Use of a Theme in Jewish Literature’, Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha, 7 (1990): 29–53.

events reported in the Bible. Islamic history, from the mission of Muhammad until the rule of the Abbasid caliphs, is a continuation of the Salvation History, or, perhaps better, ‘Election History’ as described in the Old and New Testaments. Both Bible and Tārīkh deal with the descendants of Abraham, whom God elected as His people. The Bible deals with the descendants of Abraham’s son Isaac, the Jews, while the Tārīkh focuses on the descendants of Abraham’s other son Ishmael, the Arabs. Characters of the Tārīkh, such as the Abbasid caliphs, are the successors to the characters of the Bible, such as the prophets and patriarchs. In the words of Ulrika Mårtensson: ‘al-/Tabarî wrote his history as “The True New Testament” to make the Prophet Muhammad and the caliphate the fulfilment of the Hebrew Bible’s prophecies of a Saviour and a kingdom of peace and justice.’

To show in what way the six dreams from the Tārīkh that I will treat in this chapter are reworkings of earlier biblical material, I will begin this chapter with an analysis of those biblical models, starting with Pharaoh’s dream from Genesis, Pharaoh’s confrontation with Moses as found in Exodus, and Nebuchadnezzar’s dream from the Book of Daniel. Then I will deal with the episode of how king Herod was foretold of the birth of Jesus, as found in the gospel of Matthew. Although this New Testament episode is not centred on a dream, it will be shown that it constitutes an important link in the chain that connects the history of the biblical patriarchs and prophets with that of Muhammad, as well in the chain that connects Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

After these biblical models I will treat, one by one, the six dreams of the tyrant vs. interpreter type told by Tabari, in the order in which they occur in the Tārīkh. In the course of this step-by-step analysis of four biblical episodes and six dreams from the Tārīkh, I will describe two developments. The first of these is a development that, arguably, has taken place in actual (literary) history. It shows how elements from the Old Testament stories of Joseph and Moses were reworked time after time by different authors from succeeding periods, first by the author of the Book of Daniel, then by Matthew, and finally by Tabari and his sources. Out of a cluster of motifs, most of which we already find in the original Joseph and Moses stories, each author has made a new selec-

---


tion, and each author has combined his selected motifs in a new fashion.

The second development described here is not a development within literary history, but one that takes place within the story, or fabula, of Tabari’s chronicle itself. In the course of the analysis of the six dreams from the Tārīkh I will show how the initial opposition, even enmity between the two main characters, tyrant and interpreter, gradually dissolves. At the beginning of the Tārīkh, it is the pious interpreter who is the hero, and the unbelieving tyrant is his evil arch-enemy. In the course of the chronicle, however, the tyrants become less cruel, opposition between interpreter and tyrant gradually diminishes, and the focus shifts from the interpreter hero to the ruler, until, in the last dream treated here, the hero of the episode is the ruler himself. The effects of this second development for the Islamic part of Tabari’s Tārīkh will be dealt with in the next chapters.

TEN CONFRONTATIONS BETWEEN A TYRANT AND AN ABRAHAMITE

I. THE BIBLICAL MODELS

Pharaoh and Joseph

The very first biblical confrontation between a tyrant and an interpreter of dreams is the confrontation between Pharaoh and Joseph as found in Genesis. Pharaoh dreams of seven fat cows which are eaten by seven lean ones, and of seven healthy ears of corn which are eaten by seven thin ears. ‘In the morning his mind was troubled, so he sent for all the magicians and wise men of Egypt.’¹¹⁴ None of Pharaoh’s diviners is able to make sense of this dream, but one of the courtiers remembers there is a man in prison skilled in dream interpretation: Joseph, the great-grandson of Abraham, of outstanding wisdom and beauty. This foreign slave deciphers the dream; it announces seven years of abundance which will be followed by seven years of famine. As a result of this interpretation, and his plans to deal with the coming drought, Joseph is released from prison and appointed by Pharaoh as his second-in-command.

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph: “Since God has made all this known to you, there is no-one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be in charge of my

¹¹⁴ Genesis 41:8.
palace, and all my people are to submit to your orders. Only with respect to the throne will I be greater than you.”

When the seven years of drought arrive, Joseph invites his father and brothers to come live in Egypt with their families.

Pharaoh and Moses

Several generations later, the ruling Pharaoh has become the arch-enemy of the descendants of Joseph and his brothers. There are now so many of them in Pharaoh’s country, that the Egyptians fear they will form a fifth column in case Egypt is attacked by a foreign enemy.

“The Israelites have become much too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”

Not only are the Jews put to work as slaves, Pharaoh also orders the Hebrew midwives to kill all newborn Jewish boys. When the midwives are not able to do this, Pharaoh orders his people to throw all newborn Jewish boys into the Nile.

When the Hebrew boy Moses is born, his mother puts him in a basket in the river, where he is found by Pharaoh’s daughter and adopted as her child. Just as Joseph, a former slave and prisoner, became the most powerful man under Pharaoh, Moses, a child born to slaves, escapes a violent death and is raised at the court as the grandson of the new Pharaoh. When grown up, Moses is called by God to convince Pharaoh to let the Jewish people leave Egypt. Just like Joseph interpreted Pharaoh’s dream when ‘all the magicians and wise men of Egypt’ failed, the miracles performed by Moses and his brother Aaron with their staffs are more powerful than the magic performed by Pharaoh’s ‘wise men and sorcerers.’

In the end, Moses succeeds and leads the descendants of Joseph and his brothers back to Israel.

---

116 Exodus 1:9-12.
117 Ex. 7:11.
Many years later, however, the Jews find themselves again in foreign slavery. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylonia, has conquered Jerusalem and deported the Israelites to his capital, where he orders that a number of wise and beautiful Jews be raised at his court. Among them are Daniel and three of his friends.

In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.\(^{118}\)

When Nebuchadnezzar has a number of dreams that disturb him so much that he cannot sleep anymore, he ‘summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed.’\(^{119}\)

The king commands his diviners to tell him what he has dreamt. When they reply they are not able to do this, he threatens: “If you do not tell me what my dream was and interpret it, I will have you cut into pieces.”\(^ {120}\) Apparently, the king mistrusts the good intent and interpretation skills of his prognosticators:

“You have conspired to tell me misleading and wicked things, hoping the situation will change. So then, tell me the dream, and I will know that you can interpret it for me.”\(^ {121}\)

The diviners, however, remain unable to fulfil this humanly impossible task, so Nebuchadnezzar orders the execution of ‘all the wise men of Babylon,’\(^ {122}\) a command that also endangers Daniel and his friends. However, during the night God reveals the contents of the king’s dream to Daniel. Daniel is able to tell Nebuchadnezzar that he has dreamt of a statue of a man, made of various metals. This statue is hit by a stone and breaks down.

The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to

\(^{118}\) Daniel 1:20.
\(^{119}\) Dan. 2:1-2.
\(^{120}\) Dan. 2:5.
\(^{121}\) Dan 2:9.
\(^{122}\) Dan. 2:12.
pieces at the same time...But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth.\textsuperscript{123}

Daniel explains that the statue’s golden head symbolizes Nebuchadnezzar’s own rule. The other metals stand for the reigns of other kings, of which the iron one ‘will crush and break all the others,’\textsuperscript{124} but that kingdom will be divided since the iron is mixed with baked clay. The stone that tumbles the statue and becomes a mountain filling the whole earth refers to the rule of a messiah: a final, heavenly kingdom on earth:

\begin{quote}
In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.\textsuperscript{125}
\end{quote}

As a result of this interpretation, Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges that the God of Daniel is the greatest of all Gods and appoints Daniel as ruler over the entire province of Babylon.

Daniel himself has other dreams that predict a future where Greeks and Persians will fight among each other over the Near East, which will finally come under the rule of an everlasting God-given empire.

In this episode from the Book of Daniel, a motif from the Joseph story has been combined with a motif from the Moses story. A dream of a tyrant that nobody can interpret except for an Abrahamite, a motif taken from Genesis, is put in a time of exile and slavery for the Jewish people, which is a motif from Exodus. By way of this reuse of older motifs, Daniel is presented as a latter-day Joseph, and Nebuchadnezzar as a latter-day Pharaoh. The tyrant’s dream, which in the Joseph story merely announced—temporary and surmountable—difficulties for his kingdom, is turned into a prediction of the tyrant’s downfall and of the coming, at the end of times, of an Abrahamite prophet whose kingdom will last forever. It is this combination of motifs as found in the Daniel story which forms the basis for the standard pattern of the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter’ dream. Note that Christian readers of this biblical episode could interpret the indestructible kingdom of God that Daniel announces to rule over the Near East, as referring to the coming of Christ, whereas Muslim readers could interpret it as referring to the rule of Islam.

\textsuperscript{123} Dan. 2:32-5.
\textsuperscript{124} Dan. 2:40.
\textsuperscript{125} Dan. 2:44.
Daniel explains to Nebuchadnezzar his dream and its interpretation (Daniel 2:26), Bijbelsche Historiën, 154.

_Herod and the Wise Men from the East_

In the Old Testament, the prophet announced by Daniel does not arrive. However, in the New Testament, the Christian sequel to the Hebrew Bible, we can read the following story in the gospel of Matthew. Several centuries after the Jews have returned from Babylonian exile and rebuilt Jerusalem, the Holy Land is ruled by king Herod, a vassal of the pagan Romans. One day, Herod is visited by Magi, or wise men, who have come from outside Israel, and bring the king a prediction based on an astrological observation of theirs. In the East, these wise men have seen a star, which they have interpreted as announcing the birth of a new king of the Jews. ‘When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.’¹²⁶ Herod summons ‘all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law’¹²⁷ to ask them where this Messiah will be born. Although Herod’s own advisors had not been able to predict themselves that the coming of the king of the Jews was so near, they do manage to find out in what part of Israel his birth will take place. On the

¹²⁶ Matthew 2:5.
¹²⁷ Mat. 2:4.
basis of an old text—next to dreams and astrological observations a favourite tool for divination, in this case one of the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible—Herod’s advisors predict that the Messiah will be born in the city of Bethlehem.

“But you, Bethlehem... though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”

The prediction made by the foreign Magi is thus corroborated and completed by Herod’s own advisors, Jerusalem’s high priests and scribes, the ‘ulamā’ of Judaism, and on the basis of a text from Jewish tradition, the Old Testament. The collaboration of these two groups, the advisors of the tyrant and the interpreters from abroad, implies that Jewish as well as foreign experts agree that a new king to the Jews will be born. Herod orders the Magi to locate the child for him, but when they have found the Messiah, a boy called Jesus, they are warned in a dream not to return to Jerusalem. Herod understands that the foreign prognosticators have outsmarted him, and, in a desperate attempt to prevent the prediction from coming true, orders a large-scale infanticide.

When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

Jesus, however, escapes this massacre, because the husband of his mother, Joseph, is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt, only to return to Israel after Herod has died.

In this episode from the gospel of Matthew, a motif from the struggle between Pharaoh and Moses is combined with a motif from the confrontation between Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel. A motif from Exodus, the killing of Jewish boys, is combined with a motif from the Book of Daniel, the prediction of a tyrant’s downfall and the coming of an Abrahamic ruler whose kingdom will last forever. In the Herod episode, however, this prediction is not given in a dream, but based on astrological observation and an old text. Instead of a lone interpreter, the Herod story features a group of three men, and although they are not said to

---

128 Mat. 2:6, quoting Micah 5:2.
129 Mat. 2:16.
descend from Abraham, they do come from the outside, from the East. A more fundamental modification of the motif of the expected coming of an Abrahamite ruler is the following. In comparison with the Daniel story, the ruler’s coming is moved forward from the end of times to the lifetime of the tyrant, and the Abrahamite ruler is identified: it is Jesus.

The reuse of the ‘coming of Abrahamite’ motif from the Book of Daniel in the story of Jesus implies that the Abrahamite ruler announced by Daniel is Jesus himself. Daniel’s prediction and that of the wise men from the East refer to one and the same event: the coming of Jesus.

The prediction cast by Daniel, the prediction from the Book of Micah quoted by Herod’s high priests, and the prediction made by the eastern Magi all refer to the same event: the birth of Jesus. To the explicit reference to the Old Testament as found in the quotation from the Book of Micah by Herod’s high priests, two implicit references are added by way of the reuse of a motif from Exodus and one from the Book of Daniel.

To prevent the coming of this prophet, the tyrant turns to the killing of the newborn boys. By way of repetition of the ‘infanticide’ motif from the Moses story, Jesus, the hero of the New Testament, the lawgiver and saviour of the Christians, is implicitly compared to Moses, the hero of Exodus, the lawgiver who rescued the Jews from slavery and brought them back to Israel.

Because the coming of a heavenly kingdom is announced to both Herod and Nebuchadnezzar, and because both Herod and Pharaoh massacre innocent children, Herod is presented as the successor to or equivalent of these evil Old Testament tyrants.

By way of the reuse of these two motifs, ‘infanticide’ from Exodus and ‘coming of Abrahamite’ from Daniel, Herod is cast in the role of a latter-day Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar. Jesus is the successor to the Abrahamite underdogs Joseph, Moses and Daniel, while Herod is the successor to their arch-enemies Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar.

II. RECEPTION IN THE TĀRĪKH

The king of Egypt and Joseph

The biblical story of Pharaoh’s dream of the cows is also found in the Koran as well as in Tabari’s Tārīkh. In these Islamic texts, the main protagonists of the story have slightly different labels than in the Old Tes-

\(^{110}\) Tab. I, 389–91.
tament. The Egyptian ruler in the time of Moses is called 'Pharaoh', as he is called in the Bible, but the Egyptian ruler in the days of Joseph is simply referred to as 'king of Egypt'. Joseph and Moses are considered to have been prophets, like Daniel, of the same category as Muhammad. In the Tārīkh, the descendants of Joseph and his brothers, in short the descendants of their father Jacob, are never called 'Jews' (Yahūd) but always referred to as the Banū Isrāʾīl, the sons (or tribe) of 'Israel', the name given by God to Jacob.

In the Tārīkh, the king of Egypt's dream of the cows is the first of six 'tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter' dreams. The story runs similar to that of the Bible. After the dream, the king of Egypt 'assembled his magicians, soothsayers, diviners, and prognosticators.' As we can see, 'all the magicians and wise men of Egypt' of the biblical Joseph story have been adapted in the Tārīkh to fit the pattern of 'the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers' of the biblical Daniel story. When asked to interpret his dream, the Egyptian diviners reply in the Tārīkh, like they do in the Koran: "Aḏghāth aḥlām (Confused dreams)! We are not knowledgeable in the interpretation of dreams." Finally, Joseph is fetched, and again God's prophet, an imprisoned slave, is more capable—in foretelling the truth, reading God's plan for the future and knowing what action to take—than all the advisors of the sovereign ruler of Egypt. Belief triumphs over worldly might.

Pharaoh and Moses

After Joseph's death, his descendants and those of his brothers remain in Egypt. Not only does the text of the Tārīkh never refer to these descendants as Jews, it also states that they were practising Islam. Jacob's offspring continues to practice Islam in Egypt until the Pharaoh of Moses' days arrives, who is as evil a tyrant in the Tārīkh as he is in the Bible.

The Banū Isrāʾīl continued living under the rule of the pharaohs while maintaining of their religion whatever Joseph, Jacob, Isaac and Abraham had prescribed for them of Islam, holding fast to that until the Pharaoh, to whom God sent Moses, had arrived. Among the pharaohs there was none more insolent than he toward God, or haughtier in speech, or longer-lived in his rule...There was no pharaoh more ruthless, harder-hearted, or of more evil

\[131 \text{Tab. I, 389.} \]
\[132 \text{Koran 12:44.}\]
character towards the Banū Isrāʾīl than he. He tormented them and made them slaves and chattels…\textsuperscript{133}

In the \textit{Tārīkh}, as in the Bible, the story of Moses begins with Pharaoh’s command to kill all newborn Israelite boys. Different in the two texts, however, is Pharaoh’s motivation for this massacre. In the Bible, Pharaoh was afraid that the descendants of Joseph and his brothers would form a fifth column in the case of a foreign invasion. In the \textit{Tārīkh}, Pharaoh’s massacre is motivated by a prediction that someone born among the descendants of Abraham will deprive him of his rule. In a desperate attempt to prevent this prediction from coming true, Pharaoh decides to kill all newborn Israelite boys. Tabari includes three different versions of the beginning of the Moses story in his \textit{Tārīkh}, and in each version the prediction is based on a different source: an astrological observation, a dream, and an ancient prophecy from Israelite literary tradition.

In the first version of the beginning of the Moses story, Pharaoh is approached by his diviners with a prediction based on their astrological skill.

\begin{quote}
When Moses time approached, the astrologers and diviners of Pharaoh came to him and said: “We want you to know that we find according to our lore that a child born to the Banū Isrāʾīl, the time of whose birth draws near to you, will deprive you of your rule. He will vanquish you in your dominion, send you out of your land, and change your religion.” When they told him this, he ordered the slaying of every newborn male child who would be born among the Banū Isrāʾīl …[Pharaoh] went so far in this that he almost wiped out all of them.\textsuperscript{134}
\end{quote}

In this version from the \textit{Tārīkh}, Pharaoh is even more cruel than in the Bible, for he not only kills the new-born Israelites but also tortures the pregnant mothers to have them miscarry.\textsuperscript{135}

In the second version of the prediction which warns Pharaoh about Moses, Pharaoh is not approached by his diviners and astrologers, but has a dream.\textsuperscript{136} He dreams a fire comes from Jerusalem (\textit{Bayt al-Maqdis}) which reaches the houses of Egypt (\textit{buyūt Miṣr}), burning the Egyptians (\textit{al-Qibl}, litt. the Copts) but leaving the Banū Isrāʾīl, and destroying the houses of Egypt. A vision of a fire which will burn the oppressors but leave the righteous is apocalyptic, in the sense of a final verdict at the

\textsuperscript{133} Tab. I, 445, my italics.
\textsuperscript{134} Tab. I, 445-6, my italics.
\textsuperscript{135} Tab. I, 446.
\textsuperscript{136} Tab. I, 446-7.
End of Time. The fire that destroys all of Egypt but discriminates in its destruction between Egyptians and Israelites is also reminiscent of some of the ten plagues that God sent to the Egyptians but which, according to the biblical text, did not harm the Jews: the Flies, the Death of Livestock, the Hail, the Darkness, the Slaying of the Firstborn. In the Tārīkh, the plague of the water which turns into blood affects only the Egyptians and not the Banū Isrā‘īl. 137

Just like Nebuchadnezzar in the Bible and the king of Egypt in the Tārīkh, Pharaoh calls for his ‘magicians, soothsayers, prognosticators and diviners’ to interpret this dream. They explain to him: ‘There will come from that land from which the Banū Isrā‘īl come, meaning Bayt al-Maqdis, a man in whose face one can read the destruction of Egypt.’ 138

In a third version of the beginning of the Moses story, the prediction that someone who will threaten Pharaoh’s rule shall be born among the Banū Isrā‘īl, is based on an ancient prophecy from Israelite tradition.

Pharaoh and his counselors conferred about what God had promised to Abraham: that He would appoint among his descendants prophets and kings. Some of them said that the Banū Isrā‘īl were awaiting that, not doubting it. They had thought that it might be Joseph b. Jacob, but when he died they said, “God would not have promised Abraham that.” So Pharaoh said, “What do you think [we should do]?”...They deliberated together and reached a common conclusion: Pharaoh would send men carrying knives to circulate among the Banū Isrā‘īl; wherever they found a male infant, they would kill him. 139

In all these three versions of the announcement of Moses’ coming, the prediction is cast not by foreigners, but by Pharaoh’s own diviners. Note further that an astrological prediction which is corroborated by an ancient prophecy from Jewish tradition is also found in the episode of Herod and the three Magi.

By coupling—in his versions of the Moses episode—the infanticide motif with the motif of prediction that someone will bring down the tyrant, as is done in the Herod episode (Matthew’s account of the birth of Christ), Tabari strengthens the link between the Moses episode and the Herod episode, as well as with other episodes in which this combination of motifs occurs, episodes which deal with the coming of Muhammad and are found later in the Tārīkh and which will be treated

These correspondences between the Moses-Pharaoh and Jesus-Herod episodes imply that their main characters are manifestations or incarnations of the same archetype. That such a comparison between the Moses episode and later ones is intended, as well as such a conflation between Moses and later prophets, is proven by the fact that all these three predictions not only foretell the end of the Moses story (Moses’ liberation of the Israelites from slavery and the drowning of Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea) but also announce much more destructive events to befall Egypt and Pharaoh, events that would only occur much later.

The first, astrological, prediction announces to Pharaoh that ‘a child born to the Israelites, the time of whose birth draws near to him’ will do the following things: he will not only ‘vanquish Pharaoh in his dominion’ as Moses indeed did by destroying the tyrant’s army, but also ‘deprive Pharaoh of his rule, send him out of his land, and change his religion.’ Likewise, Pharaoh’s dream is interpreted as heralding the arrival of a man coming from Jerusalem in whose face one can read ‘the destruction of Egypt’. The last prediction, the ancient Israelite prophecy, not only refers to the coming of Moses, but to the appointment of a number of prophets and kings among the descendants of Abraham.

It is true that in the Ṭārīkh, God’s treatment of Egypt is harsher than in the Bible. In Tabari’s text, Egypt is destroyed by the plagues: first by the flood, and then by the locusts, who even eat the iron nails of doors, until the houses of the Egyptians collapse, and it is specified that Pharaoh himself drowns along with his army in the Red Sea. However, Pharaoh’s religion, or that of his subjects, was only changed when the pagan Pharaonic Egyptians converted; first to Christianity and later to Islam. Pharaoh’s rule, or that of his successors—in short: Pharaonic rule in Egypt—ended when Egypt was integrated into the Byzantine empire or when it was conquered by Muslim invaders. Who do Pharaoh’s dream interpreters refer to when they speak of a man who comes from Jerusalem in whose face one can read the destruction of Egypt? Do they intend Moses, Jesus, Muhammad or a Muslim conqueror? Or is Moses conflated with his later counterparts into one per-

---

1 harvested from the biblical text. Other confrontations between tyrants and prophets were also adopted to fit this combination of infanticide and prediction motifs, for example the confrontation between Nimrod—one of Nebuchadnezzar’s forebears (see Tab. 1, 662)—and Abraham: Tab. 1, 254; 257. See also Schützinger.

141 Tab. 1, 475.
142 Tab. 1, 483.
143 Tab. 1, 481.
son? In its description of the contents of the dream, the text calls the Pharaonic Egyptians "al-Qibṭ, ‘the Copts’. This implies that the fire from the dream which burns the Qibṭ but leaves the Banū Isrā‘īl, symbolizes Islam which overcomes or converts the Christian Egyptians, the descendants of the Pharaonic Egyptians, and leaves the descendants of Abraham (the Arab Muslims) untouched. Moses victory over Pharaoh is a foreboding of the final monotheist supremacy in Egypt.

*Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel*¹⁴⁴

The third ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter’ dream in the *Tārīkh* is ascribed to Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of Babylonia, a large multi-ethnic Near Eastern Empire with its heartland in Iraq and its capital Babylon not far from the site of the later Abbasid capital Baghdad. Nebuchadnezzar is in the *Tārīkh* an even more tyrannical ruler than in the Bible. Not only has he destroyed Jerusalem¹⁴⁵ and led the Banū Isrā‘īl away in captivity,¹⁴⁶ he has gone so far as to wipe out almost all of the Israelites¹⁴⁷ as well as the Arabs,¹⁴⁸ thereby echoing the genocidal acts of Pharaoh and Herod.¹⁴⁹ According to the *Tārīkh*, Nebuchadnezzar has a dream in which he is hit by something which makes him forget what he has dreamt. He summons Daniel and his friends, who are ‘of the seed of the prophets’ to interpret his dream. Daniel and his friends ask the king to tell them first what he has seen, but Nebuchadnezzar replies: ‘I do not remember. If you do not interpret it for me, I shall cut off your shoulders.’ God reveals to Daniel and his friends what the king has dreamt and then interprets it for him. Nebuchadnezzar has dreamt of a statue, ‘its feet and legs of clay, its knees and thighs of copper, its belly of silver, the chest of gold, head and neck of iron’. In the dream, God then sent a rock from heaven, which smashed the statue and made the king forget what he dreamt. The layers of clay and different metals are the reigns of kings. The iron head and neck of the statue represent the realm of Nebuchadnezzar, more powerful than any before it. ‘The rock

¹⁴⁴ Tab. I, 667-8.
¹⁴⁵ Tab. I, 646.
¹⁴⁶ Tab. I, 647; 649; 665.
¹⁴⁷ Tab. I, 665.
¹⁴⁸ Tab. I, 671-2.
¹⁴⁹ The difference being that Nebuchadnezzar’s aggression against Israelites and Arabs is meted out as divine punishment for the disbelief of these two related peoples.
you saw, sent by God from heaven to smash it, points to a prophet God will sent from heaven to smash it all, and power will revert unto Him.\footnote{150}{Tab. I, 668.}

After these three dreams by biblical tyrants, rulers over Egypt and Babylon from the days of Joseph, Moses and Daniel, Tabari includes three dreams by post-biblical rulers: first an Arab king, and then the emperors that ruled the Byzantine and Sasanid empires in the days of the prophet Muḥammad. These three post-biblical dreams are not interpreted by Jews but by Arabs, i.e. not by the descendants of Isaac but by those of Ishmael.

\textit{Rabī’a b. Naṣr and Saṭīḥ and Shiqq}\footnote{151}{Tab. I, 911-14.}

After the Egyptian Pharaoh and the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar, the next ruler in Tabari’s \textit{Tārīkh} to have a dream none of his advisors can interpret is an Arab king: Rabī’a b. Naṣr of the Lakhmid dynasty, ruler over Yemen. Rabī’a had a dream that ‘alarmed him and continued to disquiet him...He sent out enquiries among the people of his kingdom and gathered together in his presence every soothsayer, magician, drawer of omens from the flight of birds and astrologer’. Echoing the behaviour of Nebuchadnezzar, Rabī’a wants his diviners to interpret his dream without telling them its contents, not because he has forgotten his dream like Nebuchadnezzar in the \textit{Tārīkh}, but because he mistrusts his interpreters, like the Nebuchadnezzar of the Bible:

‘If I recount it to you, I shall have no confidence that you will be able to tell me its correct interpretation; the only person who will know its correct interpretation is the one who already knows about the dream without my telling him.’

Note, however, that Rabī’a does not threaten to kill his diviners if they fail.

The diviners are incapable to fulfil this obviously impossible demand, but, just as one of Pharaoh’s advisors remembered the Jewish slave Joseph in prison, one of the men gathered by Rabī’a suggest that the king should send for Saṭīḥ and Shiqq, the best soothsayers (\textit{kuhhān}) of their time. Where Saṭīḥ and Shiqq reside is not specified in the \textit{Tārīkh}, but they come apparently from outside the king’s realm, as they were not among the diviners gathered from the far reaches of Rabī’a’s king-
dom. The text does emphasize that Saṭīḥ and Shiqq are Arabs, as their tribal genealogies are given, showing that Saṭīḥ descended from Ghas-sān and Shiqq from Anmār, the son of Nizār, the progenitor of the Arab tribes of the North.

The first to arrive at Rabī’a’s court is Saṭīḥ. As is fitting for an Arab diviner and for someone who knows the unknowable—like how the future will unfold or what somebody else has dreamt—Saṭīḥ addresses the king in rhymed prose, the language of the kāhin:

You saw in your dream a skull—
which came forth from the darkness—
and fell upon the lowlands descending to the sea—
and devoured there everything with a skull!

In a variant version recorded by Tabari, it is not a ‘skull’ but ‘blazing coals’ that come from the darkness and devour everything with a skull. There are several similarities between this dream and earlier dreams treated in this chapter. Living things are devoured, as is the case in Pharaoh’s dream of cows devouring other cows. If we read ‘skull’, then a single object destroys an entire land, as the single rock in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream destroys the statue that symbolized the reigns of great kings. If we read ‘blazing coals’, then an apocalyptic fire destroys the dreamer’s country, as in Pharaoh’s dream of the fire coming from Jerusalem.

In any case, Saṭīḥ has managed to describe exactly what Rabī’a has dreamt, and is also able to interpret it. Like Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, Rabī’a’s dream foretells the succession of several reigns, ending with a reign that will last forever. Some sixty years after Rabī’a’s time, black Abyssinians will invade and conquer Yemen. Seventy years later, a South Arabian king will expel the Abyssinians, but this king’s rule will also be cut short, this time by:

A prophet—
a pure one—
to whom the inspired revelation will come—
from on high.

Saṭīḥ explains that this prophet will be a descendant from Quraysh, and that ‘his dominion over his people shall last until the end of time.’ When

According to Abū Zayd, who deals with this dream as it is found in the Sīra of Ibn Ishāq, Saṭīḥ and Shiqq come from Mecca, i.e. from the same city as Muḥammad, the prophet whose coming they announce. ‘Ru’yā’, p. 115.
Rabī’a asks Satīḥ if time will indeed come to an end, the latter replies that this will happen on the Day of Judgement, when the righteous will rejoice and the evildoers made wretched. This last part of the prediction—the coming of an Arab prophet, his eternal rule, and a day of reckoning—does not appear to upset the king. Contrary to Herod, or Pharaoh in the Tārīkh, Rabī’a does not decide on any megalomaniac but ultimately in vain genocide to prevent the coming of this prophet.

Later, when Shiqq arrives at Rabī’a’s court, the king conceals from him what Sa’dī has said, to see whether the two interpretations will agree. Shiqq, although using different wording for his rhymed prose, is also able to tell what the king has dreamt and arrives at exactly the same interpretation. Realizing that the Abyssinians will indeed conquer Yemen, Rabī’a decides to migrate with his sons to Iraq, where he settles at the city of al-Ḥīra.

This story not only announces the coming of the prophet Muḥammad and the rule of Islam, but also predicts other important events in the history of the Arabian peninsula, connected to the struggle between the two major empires of the day: the Byzantines and the Persians. These events are the conquest of Yemen by the Abyssinians, backed by Byzantium, and their subsequent expulsion by a Yemenite king, backed by the Persians. Finally, it offers a motivation for the migration of the Lakhmids all the way from Yemen up to Iraq, where they became a vassal state for the Persian empire.

Important is here that we have an Arab king whose dream is interpreted by Arab diviners, using Arabic rhymed prose, predicting the coming of an Arab prophet. Arab history is moulded here on the example of biblical history: an Arab king echoes the behaviour of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar, and the coming of Muḥammad is heralded by events similar to those surrounding the careers of Joseph and Daniel. Moreover, the prediction that had already been announced to Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar, that the tyrants will be replaced and an everlasting kingdom be founded by ‘someone from the progeny of Abraham’, is here specified: this son of Abraham will be a son of the latter’s descendant Quraysh, and therefore turns out to be not a Jew, but an Arab.
After the Arab king Rabī‘a, it is the turn for a Persian king to be told that his empire will collapse and be conquered: the emperor of the Sasanid dynasty, Kīsrā Anūsharwān, also known as Khosrau I or Chosroes the Great, who ruled from 531-79 AD. During a very special night—in Arabia, Muḥammad is born—something befalls this most celebrated of Sasanid rulers. At first, it is unclear from the text whether what happens to Anūsharwān is a dream. The text starts with relating that on the night the prophet Muḥammad was born, a number of events occurred in the Sasanid realm. The palace of Anūsharwān, close to the site of later Baghdad, was shaken, and fourteen pinnacles of it fell down; the sacred fire of Fars, that had been burning for a thousand years, extinguished; a

\[153^\text{Tab. I, 981-4.}\]
lake in the northwest of the realm sank into the earth;\textsuperscript{154} and the emperor’s high priest dreamt that Arab horses crossed the Tigris, chasing before them refractory camels.

Then, after listing a number of events that apparently actually took place, the text rather abruptly introduces a subject that witnessed these events, or only dreamt that they happened, by stating: \textit{fa-lamma ašbaha Kisrā afzā’ahu mā ra’ā}. The translator of this portion of the \textit{Tārīkh} has rendered this line as: ‘The next morning, Kisrā was affrighted by what he had seen,’ but the Arabic could very well mean: ‘When Kisrā woke up, he was affrighted by what he had \textit{dreamt}.’ Two key verbs in this phrase are ambiguous: \textit{ašbaha} can mean ‘to be in the morning’ as well as ‘to wake up’, and \textit{ra’ā} can mean either ‘to see’ or ‘to dream’. This would leave the reader three options:

- These events (the extinguishing of the Fire etc.) occurred in reality, and Anūsharwān saw them take place with his own eyes and while he himself was wide awake;
- These events did not actually take place, but where only dreamt by the emperor;
- These events did happen in reality and were simultaneously dreamt about by Anūsharwān.

In this part of the text, there are four arguments in favour of the view that Anūsharwān saw these events in a dream. When the verb \textit{ra’ā} is connected with night, as is unambiguously the case here, this is a marker to read it as ‘to dream’. In addition, to be affrighted or worried in the morning by the object of \textit{ra’ā} is a stock effect of dreams, as can be seen from the list of motifs occurring in the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter’ dream, presented earlier in this chapter. Being frightened upon awaking occurs after the dreams of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar in both Bible and \textit{Tārīkh}, as well as after the dreams of the post-biblical rulers Rabī’a and Heraclius.

If the king had seen this taking place in reality before his own eyes while he was awake, he firstly would have to have been on different locations that same night: in his palace at the bank of the Tigris, at the lake in the Northwest of his realm, and at the site of the sacred Fire in Fars. Secondly, he would have been worried the moment he saw these

sites fall into ruin, not the following morning as one does after awaking from a frightening dream. The later events of that morning offer more proof that Anūsharwān did see these things in a dream, and that they simultaneously took place in reality. That the events took place in reality is shown by the fact that a letter arrives at court telling the news of the disappearance of the lake. This letter increases the emperor’s anguish, because it affirms a nightmare that up to that moment might only have been a delusion. That Anūsharwān had a dream is suggested by the fact that the high priest says to his king ‘I too…had a dream that same night’ (wa-ana…qad ra’aytu fī hādhihi al-layla…ru’yā).

Although the text specifies that the emperor himself was the most knowing of all his assembled advisors about the meaning of these two dreams and the destructive events that took place in his realm, Anūsharwān asks his high priests about the latter’s dream, who interprets it as referring to ‘an event which is issuing from the Arabs’.

When it was the night when the Messenger of God was born, the Aywān of Kisrā was shaken and fourteen pinnacles of it fell down, the fire of Fārs, which had not previously been extinguished for a thousand years, was extinguished, the waters of lake Sāwah sank into the earth, and the chief Mōbadh saw in a dream refractory camels running before noble Arab horses who had crossed the Tigris and had spread through those districts of it. The next morning [when he woke up], Kisrā was affrighted by what he had seen [dreamt]. He resolutely held himself back in patience, but then he considered that he ought not to conceal it from his ministers and Marzbāns… When they were all gathered together around him, he told them why he had sent for them and what he had summoned them for. While they were engaged in all this, a letter arrived bringing news of the extinguishing of the fire, so that his distress of spirit increased.

The Chief Mōbadh said, “I too—may God grant the king righteousness—had a dream that same night,” and he recounted to him his dream about the camels. The king said, “What is this thing, O Chief Mōbadh,” although he himself was the most knowing of all of them about the real meaning of that. The Chief Mōbadh replied, “An event which is issuing from the Arabs.”

As the interpretation of these dreams and events apparently concerns the Arabs, the Persian emperor decides to ask for the help of an outsider: his Arab vassal in southern Iraq, a descendant of Rabīʾa b. Naṣr and the Lakhmids who had migrated there after Rabīʾa had his dream announcing the Abyssinian invasion. Anūsharwān writes to this vassal ‘Send to me a man who is knowledgeable about what I wish to ask him’,

155 Tab. I, 981, slightly adapted translation.
an impossible demand reminiscent of Nebuchadnezzar and Rabī’ā’s order to their diviners ‘Tell me what I dreamt and interpret it for me.’ In reply to this letter, the vassal sends a certain ‘Abd al-Masīḥ al-Ghas-sānī to the Persian court, an Arab Christian, as his first name ‘Servant of the Messiah’ implies. Anūsharwān tells this man what he has dreamt, but ‘Abd al-Masīḥ is not able to interpret the dream, and refers the emperor to a third Arab who lives even farther away: ‘A maternal uncle of mine who lives in the elevated regions of Syria, called Saṭīḥ, will have knowledge about it.’

Anūsharwān sends ‘Abd al-Masīḥ to this uncle of his. After an arduous camel journey he finds Saṭīḥ, the very same soothsayer who interpreted the dream of Rabī’ā b. Naṣr, and who is now on the verge of death. As a true Arab, ‘Abd al-Masīḥ addresses his uncle with an Arabic qaṣīda, and Saṭīḥ, as a genuine Arab soothsayer, replies him in Arabic rhymed prose. Saṭīḥ tells his nephew what has happened during that eventful night in the Persian realm, and starts to interpret these events. After some vague statements that apparently refer to the future Muslim conquest of Persia, Saṭīḥ comes to the point:

Kings and queens from among them (i.e., the last Sasanids) shall reign—
according to the number of pinnacles (i.e. those fallen from the Aywān)—
and everything whose coming is decreed will come.

After uttering these words, Saṭīḥ expires on the spot. Back at the Persian court, ‘Abd al-Masīḥ confronts Anūsharwān with Saṭīḥ’s interpretation. According to the translators of this passage, the emperor is rather relieved by Saṭīḥ’s forecast, even considers it auspicious, for he deems a total of fourteen Sasanid successors (corresponding to the fourteen fallen pinnacles) quite a dynasty, not realising that the number 14 also symbolizes that 10 of these successors will rule for a total of only 4 years:

\[ \text{ilā an yamlaka minnā arba’at ash’ar malikan qad kānat umūr fa-malaka minhum \‘ashara arba’ sinīn.} \]

“Once fourteen of us have reigned, things will happen!” Ten of them, however, reigned for a total of four years only.

Compare Nöldeke: “Bis vierzehn von uns geherrscht haben, gibt’s noch allerlei!” Nun haben von ihnen aber zehn zusammen nur 4 Jahre regiert.

---

156 Tab. I, 983.
157 Tab. I, 984.
158 Th. Nöldeke, Geschicht der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden: Aus der arabischen Chronik des Ṭabari übersetzt und mit ausführlichen Erläuterungen und Ergänzungen versehen
Dreams of Rulers in Tabari’s History of Prophets and Kings

Such blindness on the part of Anūsharwān, however, does not fit well with the earlier statement that the Persian emperor was, even before the high priest told him his dream, the most knowing of all his assembled advisors about the real meaning of these events (a’lamahum ‘ind nafsīhi bi-dhālik). Maybe the words qad kānat umūr ‘things may be’ simply express the emperor’s acceptance of the fate of his dynasty. In any case, whether, in all his wisdom, the emperor accepts his fate, or whether he falsely believes the prediction to be auspicious, Anūsharwān does not act upon this prediction.

To interpret the events of a portentous night—his own dream and that of his high priest as well as strange natural events that took place throughout his realm—a Persian emperor, one of the mightiest of the Sasanid dynasty, asks Arab foreigners for help. They explain to him that his empire shall end and will be conquered by the followers of an Arab prophet, who was born on that very same night.

_Heraclius and Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb_ 159

In the _Tārīkh_, the final confrontation between a pagan tyrant and an Abrahamite interpreter is the meeting between the Byzantine emperor Heraclius and the Arab Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb. All previous episodes figured a confrontation between, at one side, a pagan tyrant, and at the other side, an interpreter that was Israelite (Joseph and Daniel) or Arab (Shiqq and Saṭīḥ). Israelites and Arabs were seen as belonging to one and the same group, both descendants of Abraham and both believers in a single God. In this final confrontation, however, all three monotheist religions play a role, and are clearly distinguished between: a Christian ruler, the Jewish people, and an Arab prophet of Islam.


Half a century after the night that shook the palace of the Sasanids, Muḥammad has grown up, his prophetic mission has begun, and he has migrated to Medina, from where he has started to harass the trade caravans of his Meccan opponents, the Qurashī elite. In the annalistic part of his Tārīkh, in the year 6 after the Prophet’s migration, Tabari has inserted a report told by the leader of Muḥammad’s Qurashī opponents: Abū Sufyān b. Ḥarb, the father of the man that would later become the first Umayyad caliph, Muʿāwiya. Abū Sufyān relates that he travelled with a trade caravan to Gaza at the time that the Byzantine emperor Heraclius had just gained a major victory over his Sasanid rivals. In this campaign, Heraclius had reconquered Jerusalem from Persian occupation and recaptured the Cross. To thank God for his victory, the emperor walks on foot from Aleppo to Jerusalem, where he has a dream.

When he reached Jerusalem and performed his worship—with him were his military commanders and the nobles of the Romans—he arose troubled one morning, turning his gaze to the sky. His military commanders said to him, “By God, you have arisen troubled this morning, O King.” “Yes,” he replied, “I was shown in a dream last night that the kingdom of the circumcision will be victorious.”

Heraclius advisors, ‘his military commanders and nobles of the Romans’, fail at correctly interpreting their emperor’s dream. They assume that a ‘kingdom of circumcision’ refers to a kingdom of the Jews (al-Yahūd). To prevent such a kingdom from coming into existence, they advise Heraclius to kill all his Jewish subjects, just like Pharaoh and Herod decided to kill the Jews in the days of Moses and Jesus. ‘Send to all over whom you have authority in your lands and command them to behead all the Jews (Yahūd) under their control, and be rid of this care.’ While they are discussing this flawed interpretation and their equally flawed countermeasures, a foreigner is brought in from the outside, led by a messenger from the king of Buṣrā (the city in Syria where the young Muhammad was recognized as a prophet by the Christian monk Bahīrā, and the first Byzantine town to be captured by the Muslims). The messenger leads an Arab, a man of ‘the people of sheep and camels’ who has important things to tell the emperor about the situation in Arabia.

Just like the Lakhmid king had sent an Arab to the Persian emperor Anūshārwan to help him interpret his dream, here the king of Buṣrā sends an Arab to the Byzantine emperor Heraclius who will be instru-

---

160 Tab. I, 1562.
mental in correctly explaining his dream. The Arab reports: ‘A man has appeared among us claiming to be a prophet.’ When Heraclius hears this, he orders to strip the Arab, who appears to be circumcised. The emperor cries out, in a moment of recognition: ‘This, by God, is what I was shown in the dream; not what you say!’

Heraclius sends this Arab away, but orders his police force to turn Syria upside down and search for another Arab more closely related to the prophet. This is how they find the narrator of this report, Abū Sufyān, and his traders, who were still at Gaza. Heraclius’ police take them to Jerusalem. On the emperor’s question: ‘Which of you is closest to him in kingship?’, Abū Sufyān, a Qurashi like Muḥammad, steps forward. He remarks in an aside: ‘I swear to God, I never saw a man I should consider more astute than this uncircumcised one—Heraclius that is.’

Heraclius starts questioning Abū Sufyān about his people’s prophet. The Qurashi leader, as an unbeliever and as Muḥammad’s enemy, does his best to minimize the Prophet’s importance. “O King,” I said, “do not worry about him. His importance is too small to affect you.” Heraclius, however, knows what to look for in the behaviour of a true prophet. When asked who make up Muhammad’s followers, Abū Sufyān replies that they are only the weak, the poor and women, thereby inadvertently disclosing the parallels between the first followers of Muḥammad and those of Jesus. Heraclius concludes:

I asked you about his followers, and you stated that they were weak, poor, juveniles, and women; but such have been the followers of the prophets in every age... And so, if you have told me the truth about him, he shall surely wrest from me this very ground under my feet. Would that I were with him that I might wash his feet!

The Christian emperor Heraclius foresees that Muhammad and his followers will become so mighty that they will eventually conquer the ground where this interrogation takes place, Jerusalem, the Holy City, not only of Judaism, but also of Jesus and Christianity. This foreknowledge that parts of his realm will be taken away from him by an Abrahamic prophet, does not seem to upset the emperor, for he concludes: ‘Would that I were with him that I might wash his feet!’, another reference to Jesus, who washed the feet of his disciples the night before he

161 Tab. I, 1563.
162 Tab. I, 1564.
was crucified, and an expression of how deeply the emperor of Byzantium was willing to humiliate himself in his recognition of a prophet from a people of sheep and camels.

Before the coming of Islam, everybody had expected that monotheist prophecies about a descendant of Abraham who would found God’s kingdom on earth, were predictions announcing the coming of a Jewish prophet, king or saviour, as had been the case with Moses and Jesus. Only when Islam arrived did people recognize that, all this time, they had been tragically blind and had been looking for this man among the wrong branch of Abraham’s offspring. For it turned out that the prophecy had announced the coming of a prophet and rulers born among the Arabs, not the descendants of Abraham’s son Isaac, but the descendants of his son Ishmael.

It is this general neglect of the Arab Abrahamites that makes Heraclius’ advisors assume their ruler’s dream predicts a kingdom of the Jews. The dream image of a kingdom of circumcision is well chosen, for male circumcision is the mark that Jews and Arabs have in common, the proof that they are related to each other and, as descendants of Abraham, share a common heritage. Circumcision, moreover, is the sign of the covenant that God had established with Abraham, in which he promised that he would appoint among his descendants kings. 

Circumcision, therefore, is the sign that connects Arabs with non-Arab Muslims; that connects Arabs and Muslims with Jews; that connects Arabs, Muslims and Jews with the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs, but that leaves out the Christians. Christians might be fellow monotheists, but as uncircumcised ones they are not part of the covenant God established with Abraham. Heraclius might be a wise and believing emperor, he is not a descendant of Abraham, and therefore can never be one of the divinely legitimized rulers God promised to appoint among the offspring of this forefather. This brings us to the figure of Heraclius.

As the ruler of a large empire who has an alarming dream that his incapable advisors fail to interpret correctly, Heraclius assumes here the role of the tyrant in the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite confrontation’. However, instead of being blind, arrogant, unjust and pagan—such as his predecessors the king of Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar and Herod—Heraclius is here wise, humble and believing: not exactly an evil tyrant,

\[163\] John 13:5.
\[164\] Gen. 17: 6-14.
but rather an ideal ruler. The emperor’s humility, for instance, is apparent from the fact that, to thank God for his victory over the Persians, he walks from Aleppo to Jerusalem on foot. In addition, the head of the Byzantine state expresses his wish to wash the feet of a prophet from a people of herdsmen.

Heraclius’ wisdom, furthermore, is apparent from the fact that it is he himself who understands the meaning of his own dream, whereas his advisors fail to interpret it correctly. In this episode, the ruler’s opponent, the foreign Abrahamite who is brought in from the outside, consists of two characters: the anonymous Arab sent to the court by the king of Buṣrā, and Abū Sufyān, transported there by the emperor’s police. Again it is stressed that these Abrahamites belong to ‘a people of sheep and camels’, as opposed to the sedentary and imperial court culture of the tyrant and his counsellors.

However, in this episode it are not the Abrahamites who interpret the ruler’s dream. They merely, and rather despite themselves, provide clues that allow the perspicuous Heraclius to find the correct interpretation himself. It is the emperor who, apparently acting on a hunch, decides to strip the anonymous Arab. What follows is a moment of anagnorisis, where the hero suddenly recognizes something of which he had been unaware up to that time; often the recognition, by way of a mark on the body of one of the other characters, that that person is a relative. Here the emperor recognizes the Arab, by way of the mark of circumcision, to be a relative of Abraham, who had hitherto been neglected by all. It is Heraclius, in his wisdom, who knows what to ask for when interrogating Abū Sufyān, and who draws the correct conclusion that Muhammad is a true prophet, worthy of his belief, and that his Arab kingdom of circumcision will become so victorious that it will eventually conquer Jerusalem and parts of his empire.

Why is it Heraclius, who, of all tyrants, has been chosen to play the role of the ‘good tyrant’ in the Islamic sources? Why wasn’t Muhammad recognized by, for example, a Persian king from the East, just as Jesus was, according to the tradition that sees the wise men from the gospel of Matthew as eastern kings. The answer appears to lie in the fact that Heraclius is a Christian tyrant: as ruler of the Byzantine empire he is the head of the Orthodox Church, God’s representative on earth, and therefore, in Islamic eyes, the leading authority of Christianity. In this episode, the Christian character of Heraclius and his rule is accentuated by various references to Jesus: the episode’s setting in Jerusalem, the

165 More on anagnorisis in chapter six 'Dreams, Suspense and Tragedy'.
emperor’s recent recapture of the Cross, and the motifs of the humble origin of the first converts and the washing of the feet.

To be legitimate, Islam, not only as an empire, but also as the third of three monotheist religions, needed the recognition of its immediate predecessor. Just as Jerusalem’s ‘chief priests and teachers of the law’, the leading authorities of Judaism in the time of Herod, endorsed the birth of Jesus as new king of the Jews, here the leading authority of Christianity, Heraclius, recognizes the prophethood of Muhammad and the future rule of Islam over Christian territories. According to Nadia El-Cheikh, it was to add credibility to his recognition of Muhammad that Heraclius was depicted as an exemplary emperor.

Heraclius, as presented by our sources, has all the attributes of an ideal ruler. This characterization is essential to the task assigned to Heraclius in the Arabic-Islamic sources, namely that of acknowledging the new faith preached by the prophet Muhammad. For, in these sources, Heraclius served one cardinal function: It was with him, ...a man whose empire would survive Islam’s onslaught to long remain its rival, that responsibility lay for recognizing and acknowledging the prophetic character of the mission of Muhammad and the excellence of his umma.166

Interestingly, this image of Heraclius as the ‘good tyrant’, is only found in the Islamic sources. In the Christian versions of this dream, Heraclius is as blind, arrogant and oppressive as the most evil of his predecessors, Herod and Pharaoh. In these Christian versions, it is not the advisors who fail, but Heraclius himself who is tragically blind, badly misunderstands his own dream, and orders all the Jews in his realm to be baptized. In some versions, Heraclius even exiles or massacres the Jews when they refuse to be converted. These Christian versions present the subsequent Islamic conquests of parts of the Byzantine empire as God’s punishment for Heraclius’ sins, for example, according to a Coptic version in Arabic, his oppression of the Copts.169

166 El-Cheikh, p. 9.
Whatever enticed Islamic authors like Tabari to cast Heraclius in the image of a good tyrant, it led them to turn around the whole opposition between bad tyrant and good Abrahamite. Ironically, in this episode the Abrahamites play the part of the bad guys. While in previous episodes the Abrahamites were believing monotheists who saw far into the future, here they lack the wisdom to recognize their fellow Arab as a true prophet. The anonymous Arab, for example, states that there has appeared among them a man who ‘claims’ to be a prophet. Apparently, he is not sure whether to believe in this prophet himself.

That this anonymous Arab has more trouble in recognizing an Arab prophet than a foreign Christian emperor is ironic. The irony is driven to the top, however, with the figure of Abū Sufyān. Every time a tyrant confronts an Abrahamite, he in fact confronts the ancestor, however distant, of another Abrahamite who will replace him as ruler over his dominion. In the case of Abū Sufyān, this ancestral relationship is especially poignant, as here the tables will be turned in the time of just one generation. It is Abū Sufyān’s own son, Mu‘awiya, who, as the first Umayyad caliph, will rule over the Holy Land and other Byzantine provinces that formerly belonged to Heraclius. Abū Sufyān, at the time of this episode still Muhammad’s arch-enemy, will eventually convert to Islam and father a line of caliphs.

The irony of this situation, and the fact that the Qurashī leader is not yet aware of the future triumph of Islam and the glory that will befall his offspring, is heightened by the fact that Abū Sufyān himself, as the blind bad guy, tells this story in the first person and divulges to the reader many of his personal thoughts. This results in dramatic irony, where the reader knows more than the narrator and/or the character. Such an aside, for example, is Abū Sufyān’s remark: ‘I swear to God, I never saw a man I should consider more astute than this uncircumcised one—Heraclius that is’. Here, ironically, the blind Abrahamite bad guy has to recognize the wisdom of the good tyrant. By his pejorative reference to the emperor as ‘this uncircumcised one’, Abū Sufyān again highlights the circumcision motif. Unwittingly, the Qurashī stresses the fact that although Heraclius is a monotheist who believes in Muḥammad, and he himself a pagan and the Prophet’s enemy, Abū Sufyān is a circumcised descendant of Abraham, while Heraclius is not. As God has chosen the Abrahamites to rule the earth, this means that Heraclius’ star is predestined to set, while Abū Sufyān’s star is destined to rise.

Table IV: Recurring Events in the Confrontations between Tyrants and Abrahamites

From top to bottom: sequence of episodes in Bible and Tārīkh
From left to right: sequence of events in each episode

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tyrant</th>
<th>Interpreter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Moses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>Moses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebuchadnezzar</td>
<td>Nebuchadnezzar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herod</td>
<td>Herod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wise Men</td>
<td>Wise Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from the East</td>
<td>from the East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tārīkh</td>
<td>Tārīkh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
<td>Pharaoh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>Moses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebuchadnezzar</td>
<td>Nebuchadnezzar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Daniel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rabī’a b. Naṣr</td>
<td>Rabī’a b. Naṣr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saṭṭāh and Shiqq</td>
<td>Saṭṭāh and Shiqq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anūsharwān</td>
<td>Anūsharwān</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saṭṭāh</td>
<td>Saṭṭāh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heraclius</td>
<td>Heraclius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abū Sufyān</td>
<td>Abū Sufyān</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Harb</td>
<td>b. Harb</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...has a dream that is explained by a foreigner.

...orders infanticide.

...orders infanticide.

An astrological prediction is explained by three foreigners.

astrological prediction/dream

...has a dream that is explained by a foreigner.

...has a dream that is explained by a foreigner.

...has a dream that is explained by two foreigners.

...has a dream that is explained by two foreigners.

...has a dream that is explained with the help of two foreigners.

...has a dream that is explained by four foreigners.¹

In the distant future, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God.

In the distant future, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God.

In the distant future, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God.

In the distant future, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God.

In the near future, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God, led by Muhammad and his successors.

In this generation, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God, led by Muhammad and his successors.

In this generation, the tyrant’s rule will be replaced by a kingdom of God, led by Muhammad and his successors.

1 Daniel and his friends Hananiah, Michael and Azariah.
Nebuchadnezzar orders to bring before him some Israelite youngsters ‘from the seed of the King’ (Daniel 1:3), Bijbelsche Historiën, 153.

The Wise Men who have come from the East are questioned by Herod (Matthew 2:7), Bijbelsche Historiën, II, 11.
CONCLUSION

Motif Repetition: A Way to Hint that Muhammad is a Legitimate Successor to Earlier Prophets

By way of motif repetition, the episodes about post-biblical prophets (Muhammad) and post-biblical tyrants (Rabī b. Naṣr, Anūsharwān, Heraclius) are linked to biblical episodes. This suggests that the Tārīkh is a sequel to the Old and New Testaments, and that the history of the Muslim umma forms a continuation of the Heilsgeschichte depicted in the Bible. Likewise, it is suggested that post-biblical characters from the Tārīkh are comparable to biblical characters, and therefore their legitimate successors as spiritual and worldly leaders. Muhammad is the latter-day counterpart to the earlier prophets Joseph, Moses, Daniel and Jesus. Islam is the legitimate successor of the earlier monotheist religions Judaism and Christianity. As expressed by Uri Rubin in The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims:

Medieval Islam was preoccupied with its own status in the world’s history, trying to establish itself as a worthy successor to other monotheistic communities which came under its control, mainly the Jews and Christians.170

In a similar vein, Rudolf Sellheim argues that Muslim historians used biblical motifs in order to address their Christian and Jewish subjects and convince them that the rule of Islam was legitimate. Sellheim discusses the work of Ibn Išāq, whose biography of the prophet was originally the second part of a much larger work. The respective volumes of this larger text were titled: I: The Beginning, II: The Life of the Prophet, III: The Conquests and IV: The Caliphs. Judging by the titles of the three volumes that have now been lost to us, this text was similar in subject to Tabari’s Tārīkh. Speaking of Ibn Išāq, Sellheim states:

Für ihn bildet das Erscheinen des Islam Fortsetzung und Schluss der ‘heiligen Geschichte’ der Juden und Christen; er ordnet die Geschichte des Propheten und des neuen Glaubens in die Geschichte der göttlichen Offenbarung ein, welche selbstverständlich mit Adam beginnt. (…) Eine solche Konzeption war aber zugleich eine Legitimation für das arabische Chalifat, welche für sich selbst sprach.171

That Tabari incorporated biblical material into his \textit{Tārīkh} is nothing new. Also common knowledge is the fact that Muḥammad was presented as the successor to earlier prophets. My contribution in this chapter has been to show how this image is created by way of motif repetition. The reuse of known motifs allows the narrator to refrain from stating in his own voice: “Muḥammad is the legitimate successor to earlier prophets.” He does not even have to say: “Muḥammad is comparable to earlier prophets.” Instead, by incorporating motifs from the stories about earlier prophets in his story of Muḥammad, he only suggests to the reader the possibility of comparing the Prophet of Islam to these biblical figures. The narrator leaves it to the reader to actually make this comparison himself, as he leaves it to the reader to draw his own conclusions on the basis of such a comparison. Motif repetition is therefore an indirect way to express the notion of Muḥammad’s biblical inheritance. Generally speaking, the reuse of motifs is a strategy to indirectly link, compare and judge events or actors. For a narrator such as the primary narrator of Tabari’s \textit{Tārīkh}, who has to abstain, for one reason or another, from directly linking, comparing and judging events in his own words, motif repetition is a strategy which allows him to indirectly steer the reader’s interpretation.

Apparently, even in the pre-Islamic part of his \textit{Tārīkh}, where Tabari had not yet restrained himself by the strict catalogue structure of unconnected events but had the freedom to tell longer stories, he saw it fit to adopt indirect narrative strategies.

\textit{Repetition and Change: The Opposition between Tyrant and Abrahamic Gradually Diminishes}

By way of the repeated use of motifs from the cluster of motifs connected to the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamic interpreter’ dream, Tabari suggests that the course of history repeats itself every time a true prophet is sent by God. Time and again, each prophet has to oppose the tyrant of his day, who appears as a reincarnation of the tyrants that opposed the previous prophets. However, in the course of pre-Islamic history as told in the \textit{Tārīkh}, there is not only repetition, but also change. In the course of centuries and more than a thousand pages in the text, the opposition between evil tyrant and good interpreter gradually diminishes. In the \textit{Tārīkh}, Pharaoh is the epitome of evil tyranny. He forces God’s people, the Abrahamites, into slavery, and, refusing in his blindness and arrogance to accept his destiny, massacres their innocent children and tortures their pregnant mothers. Nebuchadnezzar, at his turn, also enslaves the Abrahamites, but is slightly less evil: instead of murdering...
children, he threatens to cut off the shoulders of his Abrahamite diviners if they fail to fulfil a humanly impossible command.

Rabīʿa b. Naṣr is already less oppressive and less arrogant. Although he does give his diviners an impossible command, he does not threaten to kill them if they fail. When announced that an Arab prophet will eventually replace him as ruler over the Yemen, Rabīʿa, himself an Arab, does not try to avert this destiny by a massacre of innocents, but fully accepts it. The only action the king undertakes is a wise one: to migrate north in order to escape the predicted Abyssinian invasion. Although Rabīʿa’s old dominion is conquered, he flourishes in his new homeland Iraq.

The next tyrant, Anūshāwrān, is also wiser than his predecessors. Whereas none of the previous despots was able to interpret his own dream, the Sasanid emperor appears to understand the meaning of at least a part of his dream, without the consultation of others. Anūshāwrān gathers his advisors, not to ask them for an interpretation of the portentous events he has dreamt about, but because he deems it unwise to withhold this crucial information from his counsellors: ‘He considered that he ought not to conceal it from his ministers and Marzbāns.’ When he asks his high priest for an interpretation of the latter’s dream, this is apparently only to obtain a confirmation of what the emperor already understood himself, for the text states that he asked his high priest about his dream, ‘although he himself was the most knowing of all of them about the real meaning of that.’ Anūshāwrān understands that the events he dreamt about concern a threat for his empire issuing from the Arabs.

In this light, Anūshāwrān’s consultation of Satīḥ is also nothing more than a quest for confirmation of what he already suspects, this time a confirmation by someone who is, on the one hand, a more objective outsider, as he does not belong to the Persian court, and who, on the other hand, as an Arab himself, can provide more inside information. As stated above, Anūshāwrān’s emotional reaction to the prophecy that his empire will collapse after fourteen of his successors have reigned, is unclear. In any case, the emperor does not turn to cruel oppression to prevent this prediction from coming true. In addition to Anūshāwrān’s relative wisdom and the absence of acts of tyranny in this episode, Islamic sources often depict him as an example of good governance,172

whose cadastral and tax reforms should be considered as a model for Islamic rulers.\textsuperscript{173}

This development towards less cruel, oppressive, arrogant and more perspicuous tyrants culminates in the depiction of Heraclius as the ‘ideal ruler’, who completely understands his own dream and almost converts to Islam. That Tabari was not the only one to consider a later, Byzantine, tyrant as less evil than earlier despots is shown by the fact that Ibn al-Nadim mentions in his \textit{Fihrist} a book—now lost—called: \textit{The Story of the Tyrannical Babylonian and Egyptian Kings and the Wise Byzantine King.}\textsuperscript{174}

Not only the role of the tyrant, but also that of his opponent, the interpreter, changes over time. In the Old Testament, the interpreters Joseph and Daniel are the heroes of their respective episodes. As reward for their correct interpretation, they rise from slavery to high positions in the service of the tyrant. Starting with the New Testament story of Herod, however, the true heroes are not the interpreters, but the prophets whose coming they announce: Jesus, and in the \textit{Tārīkh}, Muḥammad. As a result of this shift in attention from interpreter to prophet, and as a consequence of the tyrants becoming wiser and better able to understand their own dreams, the importance of the interpreter gradually diminishes.

In the time of Rabī‘a b. Naṣr, the interpreters Saṭīḥ and Shiqq are still essential in explaining the king’s dream, but after they have fulfilled this function, they do not play any further role in their episode, unlike Joseph and Daniel in theirs. In the time of Anūsharwān, Saṭīḥ turns up again to provide an interpretation, but here not only the interpreter but also his interpretation are less important to the story, as they only provide a corroboration of what the tyrant has already grasped himself. Again the process culminates in the episode of Heraclius, where the two Abrahamites brought to the tyrant’s court do not actively interpret anything themselves, but only and inadvertently provide the ruler with clues to interpret his own dream.

At the same time that the tyrants become wiser and the interpreters less important, the initial opposition or enmity between the tyrant and


the Abrahamite diminishes as well. In their days, Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar were the outright enemies of the Abrahamites. However, Rabīʿa b. Naṣr, Anūsharwān and Heraclius have no hostile feelings towards the Arabs in general or towards the Arab interpreters brought to their courts, and they appear to completely accept the conquest of their realms by Islam and the followers of Muḥammad.

In short, one can say that the opposite extremes tyrant and Abrahamite gradually grow closer to each other, because the tyrant adopts qualities that were initially the prerequisite of the Abrahamite, such as insight in dreams, and because their initial enmity dissolves. In the next chapter, I will argue that this process of gradual rapprochement will eventually result in the fusion of these two extremes of tyrant and Abrahamite into one person, when each Abbasid caliph is depicted as the bearer of a double heritage: as head of the *umma*, that of Abrahamite descendant of the prophets, and as head of state of a large Near Eastern empire, that of successor to the pre-Islamic tyrants.
Table V. Tyrants Confront the Prophets of Their Days & The Abbasid Caliphs as Successors to Them Both

This table illustrates two major themes of the Tārīkh: Succession and Opposition. The vertical axis forms a pedigree that charts succession in the course of time. An uninterrupted line denotes succession based on genealogical descent. The horizontal axis illustrates opposition between contemporaries. The struggle between each tyrant and the prophet of his day continues within the Abbasid family in the form of competition between brothers.
THE CONFLICTING LEGACIES OF PROPHETS AND KINGS

In the previous chapter, we saw, on the basis of an analysis of a recurring type of dream, the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamic interpreter’ dream, that in the pre-Islamic section of the Tārīkh, Abrahamic prophets confront time and again, in a recurring pattern, pagan tyrants. We saw this pattern recur in Tabari’s account of events from biblical history, but also in his account of the post-biblical period up to the coming of Islam, the period of Rabī’a b. Naṣr, Anūsharwān and Heraclius. This conflict between good prophets and evil tyrants is also found in the lives of prophets whose dreams are not dealt with in the Tārīkh, such as Abraham who confronts Nimrod, and goes all the way back to the beginning of history. According to Tabari, the very first ruler was Iblīs, the Devil, who had supreme power over all the jinns that dwelt on earth. This power, however, made him so arrogant that he turned into a tyrant. God dethroned the Devil and appointed Adam, the first man and the first prophet, in his place. In the introduction, Tabari’s primary

narrator announces that two groups of people will form the main subject of his Tārīkh: the successors of Iblīs and the successors of Adam.

[Iblīs was] the one who was the first to be given royal authority...Having denied God’s divine Lordship, he was proud and overbearing toward his Lord and was therefore deprived by God of His divine favour and shamed and humiliated. We shall continue and mention those who adopted his ways and followed in his footsteps and were therefore subjected by God to His divine revenge...There were also their counterparts and successors among kings and messengers and prophets who obeyed their Lord. God willing, we shall mention them too.²

According to Tarif Khalidi, Tabari originally intended this conflict between good prophets and evil tyrants—such as encountered in the ‘tyrant vs. interpreter’ dream—to constitute the main theme of his Tārīkh of Prophets and Kings.³ However, Khalidi is only able to find this theme in the pre-Islamic section of the text, and is puzzled by its absence in the Islamic part of the work. According to Khalidi, in passages like the one quoted above...

...Tabari seeks to illustrate what he takes to be the origin, structure and ultimate destiny of world history, as symbolized by the struggle of prophets and kings. It was a vision inspired by the Quranic conflict between prophets and ‘pharaohs’, a parallel history first set in motion by Adam and Satan and their respective ‘party’ (fariq) and thereafter traceable in the histories of ‘every despotic king and every appointed caliph’...It is a history of moral ‘types’, and one which might be expected to set the stage for what is to come in the Islamic portion of the work.

But the Islamic portion is far different...There is no trace in this whole portion of the History of any explicit judgement on men or events nor any speculation on the course or significance of events...There is much that needs to be explained in this abrupt change of structure and mood...A pattern of conflict was seen to obtain in the pre-Islamic period which was nowhere spelled out in the Islamic. The ‘Adams’ and the ‘Satans’ of Islamic history are left largely to the judgement of the reader.⁴

Indeed, at the moment the Tārīkh arrives at the foundation of the first Islamic state by Muhammad and the beginning of the hijra calendar, the narrative structure of the text suddenly changes. The more or less conventional narrative of the pre-Islamic section gives way to the puzzling catalogue structure of the Islamic section that we analysed in chapter

---

² Tab. I, 78; See also Tab. I, 164.
⁴ Khalidi, pp. 79-80.
two. Does this abrupt change in narrative structure correspond with an abrupt change in theme, or even the sudden absence of a major theme, as Khalidi perceives?\(^5\) If this is the case, there could be several reasons for such a break.

1. A sudden change of plan by the author

When he arrived at the description of the rule of Muhammad over Medina, Tabari suddenly decided on a completely different outlook on the writing of history and on a different theme for his work. He failed, however, to rewrite the pre-Islamic section to fit into this new perspective.

2. The biblical predictions have been fulfilled

Not the historian, but history itself has changed with the coming of Islam: The biblical predictions have finally been fulfilled. The prophecy that there would arise among the descendants of Abraham a Messiah to defeat the pagan tyrants of this world and found God’s everlasting kingdom on earth, has finally come true. What God had promised Abraham, and what had been announced in dreams to Pharaoh\(^6\) and Nebuchadnezzar, has born fruit with the coming of the prophet Muhammad, the foundation of the Islamic state and the Arab conquest of the Byzantine and Persian empires. Now that the Muslim armies have once and for all defeated the unbelieving tyrants of this world and the Arab caliphs taken their place as just rulers over an Islamic empire—an empire that in Tabari’s time was still united and could still be believed to last forever—there is no more need for a struggle between underdog prophets and evil tyrants. Biblical history has finally come to an end.

3. History takes a radically new course

With the arrival of Muhammad, the seal of the prophets, history takes a radically new direction. In pre-Islamic times, history had followed a cyclical pattern. Again and again, God sent a prophet who opposed the tyrant of his day and taught men how to live according to His will. As time went by, this message became corrupted, people went astray, God sent a new messenger and the cycle started all over again. However, the arrival of the very last prophet Muhammad brings about a fundamental


\(^6\) Pharaoh’s dream of the man from Jerusalem, see chapter three, p. 82.
change to this pattern. History changes from a cyclical to a linear course, a straight line symbolized by the rigid annalistic structure of the Islamic section, a ticking of the clock that drowns out any attempt at narrative.\(^7\)

4. Myth gives way to ‘real history’

A legendary, mythical past with a clear-cut division between archetypal good (Abrahamite prophets) and absolute evil (pagan tyrants) has made way for the measurable, scientifically approachable reality of everyday life, ‘real history’, where the distinctions between good and evil are much more blurred and less unambiguous.

5. In the catalogue section there is no place anymore for an author’s broader vision

In the Islamic section we do not find a different conception of history with a different theme and different motifs, either due to a change of plan by the historian or to the new direction taken by history itself; in the Islamic section a main theme and a conception of history are completely absent. In the catalogue section of the Tārīkh there was no place anymore for a broader vision, a ‘master narrative’, or the author’s hand.

**BIBLICAL ‘TYRANT VS. ABRAHAMITE’ MOTIFS IN THE ISLAMIC SECTION**

If Khalidi is correct, if the change in narrative structure really does correspond with a change in theme and a change in outlook on the broader patterns that govern history, if biblical history has come to an end with Muhammad’s hijra, then we will not find in the Tārīkh’s Islamic section:

1. similar motifs as found in the pre-Islamic section;
2. biblical motifs;
3. ruler dreams of the ‘tyrant vs. interpreter’ type or any of the motifs related to this type of dream;
4. confrontations between tyrants and Abrahamite redeemers.

\(^7\) See also Daniel, ‘Bal’ami’s Account of Early Islamic History’, p. 182: ‘...a strong millenarian element in Ṭabari’s thinking, in which the shift from a cyclical and dynastic conception of pre-Islamic history to a linear model of Islamic history, with its year by year approach, seemed to mark a countdown to the end of the world.’
To test if this is indeed the case, we will in the following chapters analyse dreams of rulers from the Islamic section of the *Tārīkh*. We will analyse the dreams dreamt by Abbasid caliphs from three succeeding generations, al-Mahdī, al-Rashīd and al-Amīn, found in three successive obituary entries, those of al-Hādī, al-Rashīd and al-Amīn.

On the basis of an analysis of these dreams, it will be argued here that biblical motifs do recur in the Islamic section of the *Tārīkh*. The image of the Abbasids as revolutionaries was painted in biblical colours, as was their image as sovereign rulers over a large Near Eastern empire.

*Abbasid revolutionaries as the rightful heirs of biblical redeemers*

Within half a century after the Prophet’s death it became clear that the Islamic state was not the perfectly just Kingdom on earth. During the initial success of the Arab conquests and the first Rāshidūn or ‘rightly-guided’ successors to Muhammad, history still seemed to be set on a straight path towards salvation. Soon, however, the Arab Muslims, God’s new chosen people, started to behave like a people from the pre-Islamic period: they strayed from the right course and started fighting among themselves, until descendants of Muhammad’s erstwhile opponent Abū Sufyān usurped the caliphate. It turned out that the pre-Islamic cyclical pattern of revelation followed by corruption had not been broken.

When the ascension of the Umayyads was deemed by some illegitimate and their policies unjust, critique of their rule was expressed by way of the good vs. evil oppositions found in the pre-Islamic section of the *Tārīkh*. The Umayyads were depicted as unbelieving tyrants, and the motifs of genealogical descent and appointment by testament were dug up again. It was argued that the Umayyads, although Arabs and therefore Abrahamites, were not entitled to rule over the Islamic state because they were not closely enough related to the Prophet and had not been appointed by testament as his heirs.

The opponents to Umayyad rule also cast themselves after the model of earlier opponents to tyranny. The Abbasids claimed they were the true offspring of the last prophet, messianic underdogs who would destroy the tyrants and free the circumcised descendants of Abraham from slavery. With the coming of the Abbasids and their restoration of Muhammad’s original Islamic state, history had once again completed a full cycle. In the same way as Adam had replaced the tyrant Iblīs as just ruler over the world, and Muhammad and the Rāshidūn had replaced the pagan tyrants Heraclius and Anūsharwān as just rulers over the
Near East, so the Abbasids had replaced the Umayyad tyrants as just rulers over the umma and the Islamic empire.

To show that they were successors, almost reincarnations of earlier prophets, one Abbasid caliph called two of his sons Mūsā and Hārūn, after the biblical prophets Moses and Aaron. As insignia of their caliphal power, the Abbasids wielded a staff, a mantle, and a ring, heirlooms they claimed to have inherited from Muhammad and the preceding prophets. To show they were messianic redeemers, the father of Mūsā and Hārūn chose for himself the regnal title al-Mahdī, the Messiah, while his two sons adopted the names al-Hādī and al-Rashīd.

Now prophets have dreams. In the Koran, the major prophets Abraham, Joseph and Muhammad have dreams. Similarly, in the Bible, Daniel is renowned not only for his skills as a dream interpreter but also for being enlightened by prophetic dreams himself. So, to prove that someone is the true successor to the prophets, this successor must be presented as being guided by dreams as well. Apparently to show that the Umayyad caliphs were no true successors to the prophets, they are depicted in the Tārīkh as not having had a single dream. To show that the Abbasids were the true successors to the prophets they, on the contrary, were depicted in the Tārīkh as having dreams. In the words of Toufic Fahd, one of the authorities on Arabic dream interpretation:

The history of the dynastic rivalries between 'Abbasids and Umayyads is well known, but it is only in deftly forged dreams interpreting ab extra facts of the everyday chronicle that there appears the underlying psychological need of the former for prophetic investiture, for divine sanction, and for a mysterious voice affirming their vocation to rule and their superiority to other pretenders to the caliphate.

However, rulers having dreams in a text fraught with biblical references automatically entails the comparison with biblical rulers having dreams, and those rulers were all tyrants: in the Koran: the king of Egypt, in the Bible: Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar.

Abbasid caliphs as the rightful heirs of biblical tyrants

Authors such as Tabari presented the Islamic empire that was led by the Abbasids as the successor to earlier large Near Eastern empires. In the

---

words of Tarif Khalidi: ‘The history of the umma...was regarded with ever-increasing fascination by both the ruling elites and the literati as an imperial history on a par with the history of other great nations.’

According to Fred Donner:

[Tabari’s master narrative] shows how the caliphs, as rulers of a world-embracing empire established on the basis of the conquests, are the rightful heirs of earlier empires—especially those of Iran and Babylon and to a lesser extent those of Alexander, Rome, and Byzantium.

Thus, Tabari not only presented Muhammad, Islam, and the Arabs as the rightful heirs to earlier prophets, monotheist religions, and peoples, he also presented the Abbasid empire as the rightful heir to earlier empires. As biblical history was the main frame of reference for the first three elements (prophet, religion, and people), it also provided an important frame of reference for the fourth: the succession of Near Eastern empires, or *translatio imperii*.

1. The prophet Muhammad was presented as the successor to biblical characters, such as Joseph, Moses, Daniel and Jesus.
2. The religion Islam was presented as the successor to biblical religions, Judaism and Christianity.
3. The Arab people were presented as the successors to the chosen people of the Bible, the Jews.
4. The Abbasid empire was presented as the successor to earlier biblical empires.
5. The rulers over the Abbasid empire were presented as the successors to the rulers over those biblical empires.

Thus, as sovereign rulers over the latest Near Eastern empire, the Abbasids were seen as the rightful heirs to tyrants such as Pharaoh, Nimrod, and Nebuchadnezzar.

Tayeb El-Hibri also notes that classical Islamic historians such as Tabari compare Abbasid caliphs to biblical rulers. El-Hibri, however, only notes the comparison between Abbasid caliphs and *good* biblical rulers, such as the Israelite kings Saul, David and Solomon. Here I go a step further and argue that Tabari also compares Abbasid caliphs with *evil* biblical rulers, the very same tyrants that used to oppose the Israelites.

---

10 Khalidi, p. 82.
11 Donner, p. 131.
In Tabari's *Tārīkh*, Abbasid caliphs are presented as the bearers of two legacies: on the one hand the legacy of the believing and wise Abrahamite, descendant of nomadic herdsmen, enlightened by prophecy, and on the other hand the legacy of the almighty sedentary ruler over a large multi-ethnic and multi-religious Near Eastern empire, founder of imperial monuments, surrounded by his servants, advisors and courtiers, commander of armies, wielder of worldly might, the erstwhile archenemy of those prophets. This second heritage is not only used to paint a positive image of these caliphs, for together with positive qualities such as grandeur and omnipotence, the Abbasid caliphs are also shown to have inherited the more negative qualities of their tyrannical predecessors: blindness, arrogance and injustice. The Islamic caliphs, the heroes of Tabari's *Tārīkh of Prophets and Kings*, bear the mutually conflicting inheritances of both Abrahamite prophets and worldly kings.

This double burden leads to internal conflict. One could say that the struggle between prophets and tyrants continues not only during the Umayyad era, but even during the Abbasid period, but this time as a struggle within one family. Members of the Abbasid dynasty fight among themselves. In the Islamic section of the *Tārīkh*, Tabari produces a *khabar* about a confrontation between the caliph Mūsā al-Hādī and his brother Hārūn, which will be dealt with in more detail later in this chapter. Here it will be argued that in this anecdote the caliph Mūsā al-Hādī is cast in the role of the blind, arrogant, oppressive tyrant, while his younger brother Hārūn is cast in the role of the wise, underdog Abrahamite.

*Hārūn as Abrahamite redeemer*

In the cases of many an Abrahamite redeemer, one of his forefathers has been given a prediction: Among his offspring will arise a messiah who will replace a tyrant and found God’s everlasting kingdom on earth, ruled by the messiah’s children. Think for example of God’s promise to Abraham that he would appoint among his descendants prophets and kings.\(^{13}\)

In the case of Hārūn, his father al-Mahdī has a dream in which one of his sons wields a staff that is covered in leaves, an identifying mark of

\(^{13}\)Tab. III, 447; Matthew 2:5 quoting Micah 5:2. See also chapter three of this thesis, p. 83.
the Messiah. The dream not only signifies that this son Hārūn will replace a tyrant and beget a line of divinely sanctioned rulers, but also that he will rule over a righteous, long-lasting kingdom. In the words of the oneirocritic: “Hārūn’s reign will extend further than that of any Caliph who has ever lived; his days will be the finest of days and his age the finest of ages.”

To this prediction, Hārūn’s brother Mūsā al-Hādī reacts exactly like a biblical tyrant: blind, arrogant and oppressive. Mūsā is blind because he refuses to believe the prediction will come true. He is arrogant because he tries to avert the prophecy by taking vain measures to prevent this announced redeemer from taking his place. In vain, Mūsā tries to change the succession arrangements and imprisons his brother. In these actions he is oppressive towards the innocent: he tries to deprive Hārūn of his rightful inheritance.

One can argue that even the setting of the confrontation between the two Abbasid brothers is reminiscent of the setting of the confrontations between pre-Islamic tyrants and Abrahamite liberators. The tyrant is seated on his throne among the worldly splendours of his palace and surrounded by his supporters, while the Abrahamite contender is completely on his own.

Mūsā al-Hādī held a court session of his intimates. He summoned Ibrāhīm b. Ja’far b. Abī Ja’far, Ibrāhīm b. Salm b. Qutayba and al-Ḥarrānī. These last took their places on his left hand, together with one of al-Hādī’s black eunuchs who had the name of Aslam and the patronymic of Abū Sulaymān; al-Hādī used to repose great confidence in him and put him forward into a prominent place. Whilst the Caliph was in this situation, behold, the sāhib al-muṣallā Shāhī came in and announced the arrival of Hārūn b. al-Mahdī. Al-Hādī said: “Allow him to come in.” So Hārūn entered, greeted the Caliph, kissed his hand, and took his seat on al-Hādī’s right, but at some distance and at one side. Mūsā lowered his gaze and was silent.

Although Hārūn is all alone, he dares to speak the truth to the tyrant, in a speech in which the themes of arrogance and oppression are linked to the rule of Mūsā and the themes of humility, justice, and freedom from oppression to the future rule of himself. Hārūn says to the caliph:

“O Mūsā, if you act haughtily, you will be abased; if you show humility, you will be exalted in rank; and if you act oppressively, you will be deceived by God. I certainly hope that the ruling power will come to me in due course, so that I...”

Tab. III, 577.
Tab. III, 576.
may then mete out justice to those whom you have oppressed and give bounty
to those whom you have cut off from your generosity.”

After the confrontation with Joseph and Daniel, the tyrants Pharaoh
and Nebuchadnezzar decide to share their power with their erstwhile
opponents. They lavish the Abrahamites with gifts and raise them from
the status of slave or prisoner to appoint them as their second-in-com-
mand. After his confrontation with Hārūn, Mūsā also decides to share
his power with his erstwhile opponent and lavishes him with gifts.

Compare the following passage from the Bible where Pharaoh rewards
Joseph, with a passage from the Tārīkh where the caliph Mūsā al-Hādī
rewards Hārūn:

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of
Egypt.” Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph’s
finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his
neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and men shouted
before him, “Make way!” Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt.
Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh, but without your word no-one will
lift hand or foot in all Egypt.”

Al-Hādī exclaimed to Hārūn... “You shan’t sit anywhere else but here with me!”
and he made Hārūn sit with him in the center of the court assembly. Next he
said: “O Harrānī, convey a million dinārs to my brother, and when the collection
of the land tax is in hand, convey to him half of it; throw open for him all our
wealth in the treasuries and what was confiscated from the members of the ac-
cursed house (i.e., the Umayyads) and convey to him half of it, and let him take
everything he desires.” He put all that into execution, and when Hārūn rose to
leave, he said to Sālih, “Bring his mount near to the Caliph’s Carpet.”

Hārūn as blind tyrant

The burden of a double heritage not only leads to war and conflict be-
tween different members of the same family, but also to internal con-
flict within one character, or the development of one character from
wise redeemer to blind tyrant.

When Mūsā al-Hādī was in power, Hārūn behaved like an underdog
redeemer who would destroy the tyrant and free the latter’s subjects
from his yoke. However, when Hārūn is caliph himself, he, at his turn,
starts to adopt the behaviour of blind, evil tyrants. As a caliph Hārūn
acts unjustly: he cruelly dismembers the innocent brother of a rebel

---

16 Tab. III, 576.
17 Genesis 41:41–44, see also Tab. I, 391.
18 Tab. III, 577.
(more on this in the next chapter, ‘A handful of red earth’). In addition, he oppresses, imprisons and kills the innocent Barmakid family, his loyal advisors. In the words of Tayeb El-Hibri:

The fragile credibility of the various suggested reasons explaining Hārūn’s motives for sacking the Barmakids is specifically intended in the narratives to isolate and highlight the brazen injustice that Hārūn committed. Although hailed as an orthodox personality in one dimension of his character, Hārūn has a more controversial character as the subject of a negative moral. Hārūn can be accepted as a legitimate ruler but, like other ‘Abbāsid caliphs, he is obliquely rebuked in the sources for becoming overconfident in his power.

...A particular sinister mood floats over the psyche of Hārūn as we go through the episode of the Barmakid downfall which starkly contrasts with his earlier personality during his years as a youthful heir apparent...This unfair move against a family that had served the caliphate with dedication signalled future divine punishment of the ruler.29

When Hārūn himself has a dream that announces his death, Hārūn acts as a blind tyrant. This dream will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapter, here it suffices to state that Hārūn, just like the pre-Islamic tyrants treated in chapter three, fails to understand the dream that announces his demise. To further stress the relation with biblical tyrants, Hārūn’s incapable dream interpreter reacts with exactly the same words as the incapable dream interpreters of the king of Egypt in the Koran. Both say their rulers’ dreams are adghāth aḥlām (meaningless, uninterpretable dreams). Compare the following passage from the Koran about Pharaoh with a passage from the Tārīkh about Hārūn:

And the king said: “Lo! I saw in a dream seven fat kine which seven lean were eating, and seven green ears of corn and other (seven) dry. O notables! Expound for me my vision, if ye can interpret dreams.” They answered: “Adghāth aḥlām! And we are not knowing in the interpretation of dreams.”30

[The court physician to Hārūn al-Rashīd]: “Is all this grief because of a mere dream? Dreams only come from some fancy within the mind, or from unpleasant vapors, or some bogey arising from a fit of melancholy; they are only adghāth aḥlām!”31

29 El-Hibri, Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography, p. 34.
30 Koran 12:43–44.
31 Tab. III, 735–6.
Abbasid caliphs as tragic heroes

In classical Islam, dreams were considered a form of prophetic revelation. As stated above, to prove that they were the true descendants of prophets, the Abbasid caliphs were shown to have prophetic dreams just like Muhammad and the prophets before him had been guided by dreams. Receiving dreams, however, is not enough, you also have to be able to deal with the revelation and the truths contained there in. If you do not pay attention to the destiny that is revealed to you in dreams, you will have to bear the consequences, just as the ancient peoples who did not heed warnings of their prophets had to bear the consequences.

In their inability to deal correctly with the revelation sent to them in dreams, the Abbasid caliphs resemble the tyrants of the pre-Islamic section. In the following quote, Tayeb El-Hibri compares Hārūn with the Israelite king Saul, but his comment also applies to a comparison of the caliph with biblical tyrants:

While neither just a temporal leader, nor an infallible prophet in the Islamic sense of the term, the ‘Abbasid caliph’s figure frequently resembled in various stories the biblical king...who encounters tribulation but is able through dreams, inner awakenings, and premonitions of the future to discover closure and redemption for his errors.

Burdened by two conflicting legacies, blessed with dreams but unable to deal with them rightly, the Abbasid caliphs are presented in Tabari’s Tārīkh as tragic heroes, a point which will be developed in chapter six, ‘Three tragic rulers’.

Mūsā and Hārūn: the dream of al-Mahdī

Here I will analyse in more detail a khabar on the confrontation between the Abbasid caliph Mūsā al-Hādī and his brother Hārūn, that was already referred to above. I will begin by providing some information on the general historical background, information that can be assumed to have been part of the general knowledge of a classical Arabic audience. After a summary of the khabar in which the dream report has been embedded, I will first interpret the symbolical meaning of the imagery used in the dream. Then I will analyse how this imagery is used to judge and explain the events the dream refers to, that is, how the dream is

---

used to influence the opinion of the audience on these events. Finally, I
will analyse how the dream is embedded in the larger khabar. I will ana-
lyse the way the story is told: in what order the events are presented,
what is narrated by whom, and analyse the identity of the transmitters.
I will conclude that the judgement and explanation offered by the
dream is hidden under a deceptive layer of objective reporting.

The struggle over the succession to al-Mahdī

The Abbasid dynasty had come to power after a revolution in 750. 'Suc-
cession to the Caliphate was the most crucial political question which
confronted the ruling élite in early Abbasid times.' Each caliph design-
nated a waliʾ ahd, an heir apparent, normally one of his own sons, but
such as designation was not final. There were very few rules or prece-
dents to provide guidance in this matter. A rule like primogeniture, the
eldest son taking the entire inheritance, did not apply to the Caliphate.

Within the Abbasid family, designation by the previous Caliph was a very impor-
tant claim to legitimacy. But because such a designation was not final, no son
could be sure of his position as waliʾ ahd until the moment of his father’s death.

During the reign of the caliph al-Mahdī, the father of Mūsā and Hārūn,
two groups fought for influence at the court in Baghdad and thereby
over the Abbasid empire. On one side there were the palace servants,
most of them mawālī or freed slaves, who were later joined by the secre-
taries or kuttāb. This faction of bureaucrats and palace servants was
opposed by the army. The debate between these two groups was not
conducted 'in terms of elections or coups d'état, but by supporting dif-
ferent candidates for the succession.' The army supported Mūsā; the
palace servants and the secretaries supported Hārūn.

In the beginning of his reign, the caliph al-Mahdī appointed his son
Mūsā as his successor. Soon afterward, however, he showed signs that
he preferred his younger son Hārūn. Al-Mahdī decreed that if Mūsā
would die, the latter would not be succeeded by his own son, but by his

24 See also: Richard Kimber, 'The Succession to the Caliph Mūsā al-Hādī', JAOS, 121
25 Hugh Kennedy, 'Succession Disputes in the Early Abbasid Caliphate (132/749–
193/809)', in: ed. Robert Hillenbrand, Proceedings of the 10th Congress of the Union
29.
26 Kennedy, p. 29.
27 Kennedy, p. 32.
younger brother, Hārūn. Eventually, al-Mahdī wanted to annul Mūsā’s appointment as heir apparent altogether, and to replace him with Hārūn. Mūsā, however, who was not in Baghdad at that time, refused to step aside. When al-Mahdī and Hārūn rode out to persuade Mūsā to relinquish the throne, al-Mahdī suddenly died, and Mūsā succeeded him as caliph.²⁸

Now it was Mūsā’s turn to appoint an heir apparent. Instead of choosing his brother Hārūn, as had been decreed by al-Mahdī, Mūsā decided to appoint his own son.²⁹ This decision, however, provoked the anger of Mūsā’s mother, Khayzurān,³⁰ who chose the side of her other son Hārūn.³¹ When Mūsā died after only a year in office, it was rumoured that he had been killed by his own mother,³² because Khayzurān was afraid that Mūsā would kill her favourite Hārūn, so he could put his own son on the throne.³³

After Mūsā’s death, he was not succeeded by his son, as he had wanted, but by Hārūn, his brother. The legitimacy of this accession was ambiguous. It is true that the second-last caliph, al-Mahdī, had decreed that Mūsā should be succeeded by Hārūn, but Mūsā himself, as the last caliph, had wished that he should not be succeeded by Hārūn. For his accession to become completely legitimate, Hārūn had to prove somehow that he had more right to the throne than Mūsā’s son. Moreover, if Mūsā had indeed died an unnatural death, Hārūn’s accession to the throne was based on murder, and as long as Hārūn did not take measures to revenge his predecessor, the legitimacy of his own rule would always remain doubtful.

²⁹ Bonner, p. 84. It is unclear whether the appointment of Mūsā’s son as his successor had become completely official at the time of Mūsā’s death (see the conflicting reports in Tab. III, 571-8). There appears to be no doubt, however, as to Mūsā’s intentions, as some reports state that Mūsā put Hārūn in prison or even wanted to kill him, to secure the accession of his own son. See Tab. III, 575, note 199 by C.E. Bosworth in his annotation to the English translation, as well as Tab. III, 600.
³⁰ Tab. III, 569.
³¹ Tab. III, 578.
³² Tab. III, 569.
³³ Tab. III, 571.
Al-Mahdī’s dream

The selected khabar is set during the days of Mūsā’s caliphate. It is told by a freed slave who was present at one of the caliph’s court sessions. The friction between the two brothers is apparent. During the court session, the caliph Mūsā attacks his younger brother for thinking too much about a certain dream. He reproaches his brother:

“Oh Hārūn, it appears to me that you are dwelling to lengthily on the fulfilment of the dream...but before that can come to pass, you will have to strip the spiny leaves from the tragacanth bush’s branches! Do you really hope for the caliphate?”

To strip the tragacanth bush of its leaves was a proverbial expression meaning: to remove mountains, to accomplish the impossible. Hārūn replies to this attack with an ambiguous platitude about the vicissitudes of power. This apparently satisfies the caliph, for he rewards his younger brother with large sums of money and bestows honours upon him.

After this report of the court session, the narrator of the khabar, who is as curious as his audience regarding this dream the brothers were arguing about, turns to one of the characters. He stresses that he was on intimate terms with Hārūn, so he asks him about the dream.

Hārūn replies the narrator with a story told by his father al-Mahdī. One night, al-Mahdī relates, he dreamt that he gave a staff to two of his sons: one to Mūsā and one to Hārūn. In his dream, the staff he had given to Mūsā started to grow leaves, but only a few of them and only at the top. The staff he had given to his son Hārūn put forth leaves from one end to the other. This dream was explained by an interpreter of dreams as meaning that both these sons would become caliphs, but that the younger son would rule longer. In the words of the interpreter, Hārūn’s reign “will extend further than that of any other Caliph who has ever lived; his days will be the finest of days and his age the finest of ages.”

After this embedded story told by Hārūn, the narrator of the anecdote apparently returns to the main story line by stating: ‘Only a few days passed before Mūsā fell ill and died, his illness lasting for three
The narrator concludes by stating that Hārūn succeeded his brother and became caliph, and that his age was indeed the finest of ages.

The staff that grows leaves

Let us first analyse the dream more closely. A staff, in general a symbol of power, was one of the three insignia of the caliphate, one of the heirlooms Muhammad had bequeathed to his successors. A caliph giving two of his sons a staff is a clear sign that he wants these two sons to succeed him.

However, the Arabic word used here for staff, ṣaḏīb, also means ‘branch of a tree.’ In this sense, the two staffs are two branches of the Abbasid family tree. Mūsā’s branch only grows a few leaves: he will have but little offspring. Hārūn’s branch has leaves from beginning to end: he will be the father to a long line of caliphs.

The flowering staff has a third meaning. This plays with the fact that the names of the two brothers, Mūsā and Hārūn, are the Arabic equivalents of the names of the biblical brothers Moses and Aaron.36 In the Bible, God elects Aaron by way of a flowering staff. In the Old Testament, the twelve chiefs of Israel leave their staffs overnight in a tent to decide who will be their leader. When they come back the following morning, they find that Aaron’s staff has grown leaves. This they take as a sign that Aaron has been chosen by God to lead them.37

Finally, a flowering staff is one of the attributes by which the Mahdi, the Muslim Messiah, can be recognised.38 This Mahdi is the expected redeemer who will once again reunite all Muslims under his just leadership and whose reign will herald the beginning of the End of Times. Such messianic symbolism was an important element of Abbasid propaganda. Remember that the two brothers and their father bore the messianic epithets al-Mahdī, al-Ḥādī and al-Rashīd, which all mean ‘the rightly-guided one’ and refer to the Mahdi as the expected just ruler. The messianic interpretation of the flowering staff is also supported by the fact that there are other dreams in which Abbasid caliphs are invested with eschatological attributes. Al-Manṣūr, the grandfather of Mūsā and Hārūn, had a dream that echoes the dream of al-Mahdī. Al-

36 For other instances where the Abbasid brothers Mūsā and Hārūn are compared with the biblical brothers Moses and Aaron, see: Bonner, p. 82 & p. 86, n. 50.
37 Num. 17.
Manşūr dreamt that his own father gave him and his older brother standards with black flags. These standards were symbols of power, and the longer standard was for, again, the younger brother, al-Manşūr, who would rule longer. However, these black standards were also eschatological symbols, because in one version of this dream al-Manşūr's standard is explicitly intended to fight the Dajjāl, the Muslim Antichrist who will appear at the End of Times.\(^\text{39}\) In another version, al-Manşūr is not only given a standard but also a turban, which he has to wear ‘until the arrival of the Day of Judgement.’\(^\text{40}\)

The messianic interpretation of the flowering staff also sheds light on the expression: ‘Hārūn’s age will be the finest of ages’. In a messianic context, finest of ages could well refer to the everlasting kingdom of God that had already been announced by Daniel. This way, Hārūn’s rule is the fulfilment of biblical prophecies.

*Caliphs and Prophets*

How would this dream be understood by a classical Arabic audience, if seen against the background of the ambiguous legitimacy of Hārūn’s accession, and the rumours concerning Mūsā’s possible violent death? In short, what is implied by the dream?

Firstly, the dream shows that Hārūn’s accession to the throne and his success had been predicted beforehand. It was apparently in the nature of things that this would happen. This in itself offers some kind of explanation and justification of these events.

Secondly, the flowering staff shows that Hārūn had been chosen by God. The fact that Mūsā gave two of his sons a staff implies that he had chosen these two sons to succeed him; the fact that Hārūn’s staff grows more leaves than that of Mūsā, shows that of these two brothers, God prefers the younger one.

Thirdly, by way of the messianic connotation of the flowering staff and the expression ‘finest of ages’ it is hinted that Hārūn is not just a caliph, but that he might be the Messiah, the ultimate just restorer of religion.

In the fourth place, the link with the story of the biblical Aaron strengthens the connection, already apparent in the names of the two


brothers, of Abbasid caliphs with pre-Islamic prophets. This link between Abbasid caliphs and what I will refer to as ‘biblical prophets’ has several implications:

A) Abbasid caliphs are more than mere kings. They are different from their predecessors the Umayyads, who were nothing but tyrants who had usurped power by sheer force and without any legitimisation. Abbasid caliphs, on the other hand, are to be compared to figures like Moses, who had been chosen by God to rule his people, to give them divine law, and to lead them away from tyranny. Likewise, Abbasid caliphs are also chosen by God; they have been given a divine licence to rule, to free the community of believers from the tyranny of the Umayyads, and to give them laws. In the ongoing struggle of righteous prophets against tyranny, Moses and Aaron represent the quintessential prophet-leaders, who fought with their staffs against the archetypal tyrant, Pharaoh.

B) Abbasid caliphs are not only comparable to biblical prophets, they are also the successors to these prophets: they are the true inheritors of the prophets (waratha al-anbiyā), and the continuators of this line of rulers from world history.

C) The link of Abbasid caliphs with biblical prophets implies that the history of these caliphs is in fact a continuation of the sacred history of the Bible. By way of this connection, an event from everyday politics, an ordinary power struggle between two brothers, is raised to a higher level, that of World History. Hārūn’s succession to Mūsā is implied to be an important step in God’s plan with mankind.

At first glimpse, too much emphasis on the link between the Abbasid brothers Mūsā and Hārūn and the prophet brothers Moses and Aaron could seem dangerous for Hārūn’s image. In both the Old Testament and the Koran, Moses is more important than his younger brother. Aaron is only a sidekick, a support, a wazīr to his older brother.\footnote{Koran 25:35.}

However, because the link with biblical prophets is established in a dream, it also entails the association with the biblical prophet Joseph, the archetypal dreamer in Islam. Joseph, like Hārūn, had been told in dreams that he would be more successful than his older brothers.\footnote{For other comparisons between Hārūn and Joseph see El-Hibri, \textit{Reinterpreting Islamic Historiography}, p. 41.} This connection with Joseph entails three biblical themes that are not only found in the Joseph story but can be considered as stock themes in the
Conflicting Legacies

history of the prophets. These themes are highly relevant to the power struggle between Mūsā and Hārūn.

- The younger brother is preferred by God (as God prefers Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, and Joseph over his brothers); the younger brother receives his father’s blessing instead of the first-born, becomes the more successful one and continues the family line (as happens in the three generations of Isaac, Jacob and Joseph).

- The older brothers become jealous and try to put their younger brother out of the way (Cain slays Abel; Esau tries to kill Jacob, who has to go into exile; Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery). God does not approve of this jealousy.

- Younger brothers deceive older ones, but contrary to the deeds of the older brothers, this deceit is allowed by God (Jacob deceives his older brother Esau to receive their father’s blessing).

The resemblance of these biblical themes with the situation of the Abbasid brothers Mūsā and Hārūn is obvious. Al-Mahdī’s dream implies that it is the younger son Hārūn who has his father’s true blessing. It is Hārūn who has been chosen by God to continue the family line. Mūsā’s jealousy towards Hārūn and his efforts to put his younger brother out of the way are against God’s will. Hārūn, however, is allowed to use deceit to ensure his accession. The mother of Hārūn and Mūsā, Khayzurān, assumes the role of the mother of Jacob and Esau, Rebecca, who schemed on the side of the younger son against the older. Just as Rebecca is portrayed as the mastermind behind the betrayal of Esau, in order to relieve Jacob of his guilt, Khayzurān, and not Hārūn, is portrayed as the one who decided to kill Mūsā. Hārūn’s succession, even if against his brother’s will, is legitimate, and Hārūn does not have to revenge his brother’s murder.

The fact that a younger brother succeeds and surpasses his older brother, the legitimate caliph, and might even have put him out of the way, is not the result of the fact that Muslims live in a time devoid of divine guidance, where injustice and disorder reign, a time of tyrants who do not recoil from murdering their own kin to achieve power. To the contrary: Hārūn’s actions conform to the standard behaviour of prophets; things like this happened also in those sanctioned days when God did still send prophets to guide man. Hārūn does not act opportunistically; he obeys to a law of history.
A deceptive layer of objective reporting

All the above-mentioned interpretation in favour of the Abbasid caliphs and of Hārūn’s accession in particular, is expressed indirectly. It is hidden behind a deceptive outward appearance of objective reporting by uninvolved reporters. The secondary narrator who relates the *khabar* pretends to adhere to all the conventions of classical chronicles: he pretends to be simply testifying what he heard and saw with his own ears and eyes, and to refrain from giving his own opinion on the events he witnessed.

As is conventional for historical reports in classical Arabic chronicles, the anecdote is preceded by an *isnad*, a chain of transmitters. This chain bridges the distance in time between the historian Tabari and the reported event. At first glance, the isnad seems just a list of names without faces, but if we examine it more closely, it appears that the transmitters of this particular story belonged to a specific group.

Tabari claims to have heard the story from a certain Muhammad b. al-Qāsim b. al-Rabī’. This man was presumably the grandson of al-Rabī’ b. Yūnus,43 the leader of the palace servants who supported Hārūn.44 This grandson had heard the story from the son of someone who had witnessed the events personally: Ḥārūn ‘used to regard him as a close companion’. This eyewitness was a freed slave,45 like most of the palace servants, and as he was present during the court session, he probably did serve in the palace himself. The anecdote is thus presented by Tabari to have circulated among palace servants and their offspring, who tended to support Hārūn.

The secondary narrator Ḥārūn ‘Amr al-Rūmī, however, does his best to appear as an objective reporter, who does not take sides. Three modes of reporting are used by the narrator to appear as reliable and objective a reporter as possible: 1. Detailed report of a scene the narrator actually witnessed. 2. Consultation of another informant to obtain information about things the narrator did not witness himself, definition of relationship to this second informant (the narrator states that his informant Ḥārūn ‘used to regard him as a close companion’). 3. Conclusion of the report in which the narrator refers to general knowledge of the audience.

It should be noted that his method of reporting results in a reversal of the story’s chronology: The embedded story of the dream told to the

44 Kennedy, p. 30.
45 See Tab. III, 576, note 207 by Bosworth.
narrator by Hārūn becomes a flash back to the time Hārūn’s father was still alive.

Nowhere does the secondary narrator say directly: In my opinion, Hārūn was more fit to rule than his brother; Hārūn was chosen by God. The narrator does not even quote characters who express their opinion and offer these judgements. All the secondary narrator does is to quote someone who describes his own dream. The account of a dream is not the expression of a personal opinion, but an eyewitness report of an experience the dreamer underwent. This dream is explained, but this is done by a dream interpreter, someone who is also not stating his personal opinion, but just doing his job, translating a message according to the rules of his trade. The statement ‘Hārūn’s age will be the finest of ages’ is of course a statement of opinion, but by putting it in the mouth of a dream interpreter, who is just decoding an event, it is disguised as a statement of fact.

One could say that to voice the opinion: ‘Hārūn’s age is the finest of ages’, the secondary narrator hides behind Hārūn, who hides behind his father, who is just reporting an experience he pretended not to understand himself, so the father in his turn hides behind an interpreter of dreams.

In the conclusion to the anecdote, the statement of opinion ‘Hārūn’s age is the finest of ages’ is even repeated a second time, but again the narrator pretends that it is a statement of fact and not the opinion of himself or one of the characters. In his conclusion, the secondary narrator pretends just to be summarising what was said before or to be repeating what is already unquestioned general knowledge of the audience.

The other judgements on the legitimacy of Hārūn’s accession, such as the link between Hārūn and biblical prophets and Hārūn and the Messiah, are not even mentioned in the anecdote at all. By reporting a dream, you can pretend to be just reporting an event. Every reader or listener, however, was of course aware that dreams could be more than events, that they are also messages, that can be decoded. Although the dream of the flowering staffs is explained by an interpreter, most of this decoding is left to the audience. Neither the secondary narrator nor the characters explain that the flowering staff is a reference to the biblical story of Aaron or to the messiah.
CONCLUSION

A prediction based on a dream could be used by a narrator to highlight the predicted event. What is more important, a dream report offers the narrator several possibilities to express his opinion in an indirect way. By reporting a dream, the narrator seems to be reporting an event. The particular event of dream, however, offered the narrator three possibilities to provide judgement or interpretation.

Dreams offer scope to introduce symbols. In contrast to reports about events from waking, daily life, the report of a dream could contain fantastic imagery. It would have gone too far to spread the story that Hārūn’s staff miraculously put forth flowers in real life, as did happen in the biblical story. Such miracles were against the conventions of classical Arabic historiography, and such a story would probably not have been believed by a classical Arabic audience. These miracles could only occur in dreams. Because dreams were considered to be more than events, to be messages which could be decoded, the narrator could expect that his audience would give the fantastic imagery of dreams a symbolical interpretation.

To steer the interpretation of the dream by the audience, the narrator could introduce an interpreter. By quoting the interpreter of the dream, the narrator seems to be quoting someone who is not giving a personal opinion, but just translating, applying the rules of the science of dream interpretation.

Whether or not a dream contained symbolism, whether it was interpreted or not, a dream was considered to be a sign from God. By way of a dream, a narrator could imply Gods approval, one of the strongest opinions possible.

By using dreams, the narrator was able to express an opinion without having to step outside the conventions of the classical Arabic chronicle.

The transition from the pre-Islamic to the Islamic section of the Tārīkh shows a break in narrative structure. This change in structure, however, does not correspond with a break in motifs used. Biblical motifs are not only found in the pre-Islamic section, but also in the Islamic section, as is shown by the recurrence of the biblical ‘staff that grows leaves’ in the dream of al-Mahdī. Motifs from the cluster of motifs surrounding the ‘tyrant vs. interpreter’ dream also recur in the Islamic section, as the struggle between tyrant and redeemer continues as a struggle within the Abbasid family. By way of motif repetition, Tabari is able to indirectly compare Abbasid caliphs with pre-Islamic prophets and tyrants, thereby indirectly passing judgement on their actions.
A Handful of Red Earth

Al-Mahdi’s dream of the flowering staff that foretells Harun’s greatness is included in the obituary entry of Musa al-Hadi, the very last entry before the start of the regnal chapter devoted to the caliphate of Harun al-Rashid. At the end of that regnal chapter, in Harun’s own obituary entry, we find another dream, but this one predicts Harun’s demise. This dream is included in a khabar put in the mouth of Jibril b. Bukhtishu’, the caliph’s personal physician.

Jibril b. Bukhtishu’ relates the following. One morning, when he is with Harun at his residence al-Raqqa, the caliph tells him about a terrifying dream he has had: He was sitting on his sofa, when from under it appeared a hand and a forearm which looked strangely familiar (dhirā’ a’rifuhā wa-kaff a’rifuhā lā afhamu ism ṣāhibihā). The hand was filled with red earth. Then a voice spoke: “This is the earth in which you will be buried”. “Where is this earth?” the caliph asked. “‘In Tus” (a city in Khurasan, the eastern part of the Islamic empire). Then the voice fell silent, the hand disappeared, and Harun woke up. Jibril declares he attaches no importance to dreams, and advises the caliph to do the same. As the days go by, both the caliph and his physician forget about the dream. Harun decides to travel to Khurasan to deal with the rebellion there of a man called Rafi’. On the way, however, he falls ill and they have to halt.
at Ṭūs. Lying sick there, Hārūn suddenly remembers the dream. He asks his eunuch Masrūr to fetch some earth from the garden. The eunuch comes back with a handful of earth, having pulled his sleeve back from his forearm. Hārūn shouts: “By God, this is the forearm which I saw in my dream; by God, this is the very same hand; and by God, this is the red earth, you haven’t omitted anything!” Within three days, the caliph dies and is buried in the garden.¹

**The place of Hārūn’s dream within the structure of Tabari’s Tārīkh**

Let us consider how Jibrīl’s report of the caliph’s dream is embedded in the larger structure of Tabari’s Tārīkh. When we analyse the place of the report on Hārūn’s dream within the structure of Tabari’s historical catalogue, we notice that it has been located at an important structural junction. The dream is embedded in the entry on Hārūn’s death, which is the final and concluding entry on Hārūn’s life and reign. This entry is Hārūn’s obituary entry, which could be said to be the most important of all the entries dealing with a caliph and his reign. It is also the last entry before a new cycle or reign begins, in Hārūn’s case the caliphate of his son al-Amīn, which will end with Amīn being murdered by his brother al-Ma’mūn.

As we can see in Table II, the dream report, *khabar* 193.5.1, is preceded by the words ‘In this year, Hārūn al-Rashīd died’ and the heading ‘Mentioning of the reportage on the cause of his death and the place where he died.’ Consequently, when starting to read this report, the reader already knows that Hārūn will die. This, however, is not the only announcement that prepares the reader of Tabari’s Tārīkh for Hārūn’s impending death.

When the user of Tabari’s historical catalogue reads this work as if it were a text to be read from beginning to end, that is, if he reads all the entries in the order in which they are presented in the Tārīkh, he is presented with a chronologically arranged list of events. The key events are arranged in the order in which they have happened in the world the text refers to.

Events referred to in the dream report (the caliph’s stay at al-Raqqa, his decision to travel to Khurasān when Rāfi’ starts a rebellion there, etc.) are presented to the reader in earlier entries. Hārūn’s decision to

¹Tab. III, 735-7.
travel to Khurasān, for example, is presented in the second entry of the year 192:

In this year, al-Rashīd arrived from al-Raqqa by boat at the City of Peace, intending to set out for Khurāsān and attack Rāfi.²

The sequence in which these bits of information are presented to the reader allows him to reconstruct a sequence of events which took place in the world the text refers to:

- In Khurasān, a certain Rāfi' starts a rebellion against the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd;
- Hārūn decides to travel from al-Raqqa to Khurasān to deal with this rebellion;
- al-Ma'mūn asks to accompany his father Hārūn because the latter is ill;
- On the way to Khurasān, Hārūn reveals to a servant—by showing his bandaged abdomen—that his condition is fatal;
- Al-Faḍl, one of Hārūn’s advisors, dies five months before Hārūn’s death, predicting that his fate is linked to that of Hārūn (khabar 193.1.1);
- Hārūn halts at Ṭūs because of his illness (khabar 193.3.1);
- During his stay at Ṭūs, Hārūn orders the execution of Bashīr, the brother of the rebel Rāfi’ (khabar 193.4.1).

These events are presented to the reader in the same order as they happened in the world the text refers to. When we come to the dream report, however, the chronological sequence of events is abandoned. The narrator Jibrīl b. Bukhtīshū’ starts this report with the words: ‘I was with al-Rashīd in al-Raqqa’, thereby taking the reader back at least a year, to the time before Hārūn decided to travel to Khurasān and probably before he knew he was ill.

Jibrīl’s report can be divided into three parts:
1. An account of the discussion between Jibrīl and the caliph which took place on the morning after Hārūn’s dream, when he was still in his residence al-Raqqa. Compared to the preceding entry which deals with Hārūn’s execution of Bashīr at Ṭūs, this is a flashback or retroversion which takes the reader back at least one year in time.
2. A shortened account of the time that has passed since Hārūn’s dream at al-Raqqa until his halting at Ṭūs.
3. An account of Hārūn’s last days at Ṭūs: the caliph remembers his dream and dies three days later. This third part is a chronological sequel to the event treated in the preceding entry, i.e. the execution of Bashīr.

² Tab. III, 730.
An effect of the flashback is this: it connects Rāfi‘ī’s rebellion to the death of Hārūn, for this rebellion causes him to travel to Khurasān despite of his illness; his illness causes him to halt there at Tūs; Tūs was the city where Hārūn was destined to be buried. The flashback provides a common background to all the entries treated in between the entry on Hārūn’s decision to travel to Khurasān and the entry on the caliph’s death. It suggests a retrospective causal link between a number of events from intermediate entries.

THE DISMEMBERMENT OF BASHĪR

In the analysis of the structure of Tabari’s Tārīkh I stated that the primary narrator of this chronicle never establishes a relation between events from different entries in an explicit way. Such a relation, however, can be suggested by the secondary narrators or the characters. Jibrīl’s flashback to Hārūn’s decision to travel to Khurasān, raises the suggestion that all the intermediate entries are somehow related to the entry on Hārūn’s death.

Moreover, secondary narrators and characters can also link information from different entries or different reports in a more explicit way. This way, Hārūn’s death is explicitly linked to an event from another entry (193.4), dealing with the capture of Bashīr. In this entry, the character Hārūn is quoted as linking his own death to the death of Bashīr: “I don’t want death to come upon me whilst two of his members remain on his body.” This entry immediately precedes the entry on Hārūn’s death and deals in fact with a battle between al-Rashīd’s general and the supporters of Rāfi‘ī, the man who had rebelled in Khurasān. During this battle, the general captures Rāfi‘ī’s brother Bashīr and sends him to the caliph who has halted at Tūs. This information is illustrated by a single khabar (193.4.1), told by one of the men who brought Bashīr to Hārūn. He relates how the captive was received by the caliph:

I was one of those who brought Rāfi‘ī’s brother to al-Rashīd...Bashīr went into al-Rashīd’s presence, when the Caliph was lying on a bed, elevated above the ground by the length of the bone of the forearm [ašm al-dhirā].

Hārūn decides to execute Bashīr in a gruesome way:

3 Tab. III, 734.
4 Tab. III, 734, my italics.
He summoned a butcher and told him, “Don’t sharpen your knives, leave them as they are, dismember this evildoer son of an evildoer and be quick about it. I don’t want death to come upon me whilst two of his members remain on his body [wa-‘udhān min a‘dā’i fi jismihī].” So the butcher dismembered him until he left him a pile of severed members [hātha jā‘alahu ašhā‘]. The Caliph said, “Count up his members [a‘dā’ahu].” I counted his members, and lo, there were fourteen of them...Then he [the caliph] lost consciousness.

Not only the fact that Hārūn mentions his own impending death in relation to the execution of Bashīr, but also the place of these reports in the structure of the Tārīkh leads the reader to connect Hārūn’s death to Bashīr’s execution. As this report about Bashīr’s execution is the only and final report of the entry about Bashīr’s capture, it is immediately followed by an entry that starts with the words ‘In this year, Hārūn al-Rashīd died’, continues with the heading ‘Mentioning of the reportage on the cause of his death’, and then presents Jibrīl’s report about Hārūn’s dream. As a result, the report of Hārūn ordering a man to be dismembered is almost instantly followed by the report of a dream in which the caliph is haunted by a forearm and a hand which look familiar.

Another hint to the reader that the two reports should be related is the remarkable attention to certain details in the story of the execution. Firstly, there is the description of the height of Hārūn’s sofa: ‘elevated above the ground by the length of the bone of the forearm.’ This sarīr, Hārūn’s throne or sofa, is mentioned several times in the Tārīkh, but this is the only instance that its height is specified. Secondly, there is the strange wish of the caliph that the parts of the executed body be counted (as if he were afraid that during the removal of the corpse some of the severed members would be overlooked). The number of fourteen members apparently refers to the fact that if all the major joints of a human body are cut, the body is divided into fourteen pieces. These remarkable details, combined with the caliph’s expression that he does not want to die as long as there remain two members on Bashīr’s body, highlight two elements of the execution report: Hārūn’s sarīr and severed body parts. It are exactly these two elements which also play an essential role in the dream. In the report immediately following that of Hārūn’s dream (khabar 193.5.2), Bashīr’s execution and Hārūn’s death are connected once again. This report, the second report of the entry on Hārūn’s death, states that Jibrīl b. Bukhtīshū’ had made a mistake in the treatment of al-Rashīd and that the caliph had therefore

5 Tab. III, 734-5.
decided ‘to put Jibrīl to death and have his limbs dismembered just as he had Rāfi’s brother dismembered.’ Jibrīl only escapes this terrible end because he asks the caliph for one day respite, and that night the caliph dies.6

We know from at least one of the Tārīkh’s medieval readers that he interpreted these hints and linked the execution of Bashīr to Hārūn’s demise. In 352/963, some forty years after Tabari’s death in 310/923, his Tārīkh was translated into Persian by Balʿamī. This translation is a free adaptation of Tabari’s work. Balʿamī omits Hārūn’s dream and moves immediately from the execution of Bashīr to Hārūn’s death: ‘On le coupà ensuite, en présence de Haroun, en quatorze morceaux. Haroun mourut dix jours après cette execution.’7

Moreover, the motif of a ruler being haunted in dreams by images of the last victim he had ordered to be executed, also appears elsewhere in Tabari’s chronicle. When the cruel governor al-Ḥajjāj decapitates the pious Koran reader and traditionist Saʿīd b. Jubayr, as punishment for the latter’s rebelling against the tyrannical Umayyad caliphs, al-Ḥajjāj is haunted in his dreams by visions of his victim. Just like Hārūn, al-Ḥajjāj dies within so many days after this execution.8

In conclusion we can say that the reader is given five hints to link the report of Hārūn’s dream and death to the report of Bashīr’s execution. That medieval readers were likely to pick up these hints is shown by the example of Tabari’s Persian translator. The five hints are the following:

1) the flashback to the time Hārūn was still at al-Raqqa raises the suggestion that all intermediate events are somehow related to Hārūn’s death;
2) the character Hārūn explicitly links his death to that of Bashīr;
3) the two reports immediately follow each other;
4) in the execution report two elements are highlighted which also play a prominent role in the dream: severed members in connection with Hārūn’s sarīr;
5) in a third report immediately following the dream report, an anonymous secondary narrator explicitly links Hārūn’s death once more to Bashīr’s execution.

6 Tab. III, 737.
8 Tab. II, 1265.
Why would Tabari want his readers to connect these two entries? Indirectly connecting different entries is Tabari’s way to show that the events treated in his chronicle are not random, meaningless and unrelated events, which just happened to take place in the same year, but that they are steps in the unfolding of History, steps of God’s plan with mankind.

**The archangel Gabriel shows the Prophet Muhammad**

**A handful of red earth**

A connection between the report on Hārūn’s dream of red earth and the report on Bashīr’s execution does not explain all details of the dream report. Several questions are left unanswered: Why does the forearm with the hand hold red earth? Why is Hārūn buried in earth that is red?

A handful of red earth (*kaфф fīhâ turba /uni1E25amrâ/*uni02BE) is not mentioned elsewhere in Tabari’s chronicle, but it could be a reference to a report contained in another text that was well known to Tabari’s readers. To find such a report, however, is far from easy. Some of the texts known in Tabari’s days were transmitted only orally. Of the handwritten texts, most are lost, and only some have been edited. On the other hand, reports that circulated in Tabari’s time, whether in a spoken or written version, might have found their way into later manuscripts which are known to us. However, as these reports are not dated, we can never be sure whether they really date from Tabari’s time.

Arguably, the texts that were best known to Tabari’s readers, apart from the Koran, were the hadith, the sayings of the Prophet. There is a hadith, preserved in different versions, that mentions a handful of red earth. According to this hadith, the Prophet Muhammad woke up crying, after being visited in his sleep by Jibrîl (the archangel Gabriel). Jibrîl had told the Prophet that his grandson al-Ḥusayn would be killed by the community of believers, and had shown him a handful of red earth: the earth of the place where al-Ḥusayn would be murdered. This hadith obviously refers to the battle of Kerbela, where Muhammad’s grandson al-Ḥusayn was killed by other Muslims, decapitated, and then buried on the spot.

In the hadith, the earth from al-Ḥusayn’s grave is probably red because of the blood of martyrs that was shed there. In one version of this hadith the colour of the earth given to Muhammad is left unspecified,

---

but the Prophet says: If this earth turns to blood I’ll know my grandson has been killed. Earth, red because of the blood of a martyr, is also mentioned by the famous 12th century voyager Ibn Jubayr. When he describes the mosque of Hamza, Muhammad’s uncle, at the mountain of Uhud in Arabia, where Hamza was slain fighting the unbelievers, Ibn Jubayr states: ‘Around [the graves of] the martyrs is red earth (turba ḥamrā’). This earth is ascribed to Hamza and is venerated by the people.’

The hadith about the death of al-Husayn shares two elements with the report on Hārūn’s dream of red earth. In both stories figures a character named Jibril, and both reports contain the narrative motif of a dream in which a handful of red earth from a grave announces someone’s death. Apparently, the author of the report on Hārūn’s dream of red earth wants his readers to draw a parallel between Hārūn’s death and the death of the Prophet’s grandson al-Husayn.

The murder of the Prophet’s grandson by other Muslims as the result of civil war (the Second Fitna) was a traumatic event in the history of the Islamic community. After Muhammad’s death and the initial success of the conquest of the Persian and Byzantine empires under the first four rightly guided caliphs, the young community of believers was not able to avoid civil war: they started fighting among themselves over their Prophet’s political and religious inheritance. This civil strife eventually led to the murdering of the Prophet’s grandson al-Husayn, and to the rise to power of the Umayyads, a dynasty of caliphs who were not closely related to the Prophet and were considered by many as illegal usurpers.

After a revolution, the Umayyads were replaced by the Abbasids, who were members of the family of the Prophet as descendants of his uncle al-‘Abbās. The Abbasids claimed not only to have restored the

---

house of the Prophets to its original supreme power but also to have restored the original unity of the early community of believers. Under Hārūn al-Rashīd, the fifth Abbasid caliph, the Islamic empire seemed to have reached its apogee. Hārūn, however, could not make up his mind who of his sons should succeed him, so he decided to leave the eastern province of Khurasān under the governance of his oldest son al-Ma'mūn and appointed his son al-Amīn as caliph over the rest of the empire. This situation ensued in a new civil war, which ended with a gruesome example of fratricide: the decapitation of al-Amīn by his half-brother al-Ma'mūn, who became the new caliph.

The events following Hārūn’s death are an echo of the events following the death of the Prophet. History repeats itself, and produces similar dreams. By way of a handful of red earth, the Prophet is foretold that after his death his grandson will be decapitated by another Muslim, in a civil war over the supremacy over the community of believers: the Second Fitna. Likewise, by way of a handful of red earth, Hārūn is foretold that he himself will die; a death which will lead to his son being decapitated by his half-brother, in another civil war over the supremacy over the community of believers, a war sometimes called the Fourth Fitna.

The entry on Hārūn’s death being the final entry of his reign, this was an appropriate place to point forward to what was going to happen in the following reign, and how the next caliph, al-Amīn, would come to his end.

HĀRŪN IS BURIED IN EARTH THAT LATER BECOMES THE GRAVE OF THE EIGHTH SHI’I IMAM ʿALĪ AL-RIDĀ

But if this comparison between the civil wars after the deaths of the Prophet and Hārūn was the sole intention of the author of this report on Hārūn’s dream, why then is the similarity in their dreams only partial? Why isn’t Hārūn, like the Prophet, shown a handful of red earth from the grave of his son, but a handful of earth from his own grave? Why is it the caliph himself who will be buried in blood-red soil? Why is the place where Hārūn was buried of specific importance, as can been concluded from the heading: ‘Mentioning of the reportage on the cause of his death and the place where he died,’ which immediately precedes the report on the caliph’s dream?

The place where al-Ḥusayn was martyred and buried (in Kerbela in Iraq) became a shrine or martyrium, a mashhad, that was visited by pilgrims and venerated especially by Shi’i Muslims. The Shi’ites considered al-Ḥusayn to be their Imam, i.e. a spiritual leader from among the des-
cendants of ‘Alī b. Abī Țalib, who had inherited the right to rule as well as a divine esoteric wisdom that ultimately reached back to the Prophet. Al-Ḥusayn was considered to be the third in line to have inherited such wisdom, after his brother al-Ḥasan and their father ‘Alī b. Abī Țalib, and therefore to be the third Imam.

Surprisingly, the place where the caliph Hārūn was buried would also become a place of worship for Shi’i Muslims. Some ten years after Hārūn’s burial at Tūs, his son al-Ma’mūn visited this city in the company of his adoptive son and heir apparent ‘Alī al-Riḍā. This adoptive son was not an Abbasid but one of the descendants of ‘Alī b. Abī Țalib; the Shi’ites considered ‘Alī al-Riḍā to be their eighth Imam. The adoption, however, was not accepted by the rest of the Abbasid family. When passing at Tūs with al-Ma’mūn, ‘Alī suddenly died, and was buried next to his (adoptive) grandfather Hārūn. Some said ‘Alī died after eating too many grapes, others rumoured he had been murdered, apparently on the orders of his adoptive brother al-Ma’mūn. Whether or not he died a violent death, ‘Alī al-Riḍā’s grave also became a martyrium that was visited by Shi’i pilgrims. As a mashhad almost as important as that of al-Ḥusayn in Kerbela, the place of ‘Alī al-Riḍā’s grave became the centre of an entire city known as Meshhed, which would later become the new capital of Khurasān.12

With this knowledge in mind, we can see Hārūn’s dream of red earth in a different light. Red earth apparently stands for the blood-drenched earth from the grave of martyrs. In his dream, Hārūn is foretold that the place where he will be buried will later become the place of a mashhad; he will be buried in red, that is ‘venerated’ ground.

Fratricide and civil war

Hārūn al-Rashīd’s dream of red earth is part of an entry that begins with the words of the primary narrator: ‘In this year Hārūn al-Rashīd died.’ Accordingly, the reader immediately knows that the caliph will die. After this announcement a secondary narrator is introduced, the caliph’s physician, who reports a dream the caliph has had. As the caliph had this dream a considerable time before his death, the report of the dream is a flashback. The flashback has the effect of suggesting a relation between the death of the caliph and events in the past. The relation is strengthened by emphasizing certain details of the dream.

12 M. Streck, ‘Mashhad’, EI², vi, p. 713.
These details are, in the first place, the caliph’s sofa and severed body parts. Both the sofa and body parts occur in an entry in which the story is told of a brutal execution on the orders of the caliph. This entry just precedes the entry in which the death of the caliph is presented. In this way a connection is suggested: the death of the caliph might have been a punishment for the cruel way he had someone executed.

Other details, such as a hand with red earth and the prediction that the caliph will be buried in red earth, do not occur in this story of an execution. However, they can be related to other elements.

As regards the hand with red earth I point out the following: in a story that does not occur in the Tārīkh, but that the readers were likely to have known, it is told that the Prophet Mohammed dreamt that his grandson was murdered—on red earth. As in the caliph’s dream red earth is mentioned as a foreboding of his death, it is not said explicitly that the caliph’s situation is similar to that of the Prophet, but the reader is offered the possibility to make this connection.

Finally there is the prediction that the caliph will be buried in red earth. This can be related to the fact that the place where the Prophet’s grandson has been buried later became a place of worship. The same eventually happens with the place the caliph is buried, it becomes a martyrium as well.

Accordingly, the dream does three things:

1) it provides a (causal) connection between the death of the caliph and a previous cruel execution;
2) it compares the caliph with the Prophet;
3) it indicates that the place in which the caliph is buried later becomes a place of worship.

By using a dream, Tabari is able to compare an Abbasid caliph to the prophet Muhammad while at the same time casting that caliph as a modern equivalent to a biblical tyrant, who is punished for his cruelty towards the innocent. By way of a single dream, Tabari highlights both sides of Hārūn’s ambiguous character: prophet and tyrant in one.

The motif ‘death foretold by a handful of red earth’ is used to link the death of Hārūn to the murder of the Prophet’s grandson. This link serves to compare the tragedy that befell the Prophet (as a result of civil war, his grandson al-Husayn was decapitated by fellow Muslims) with the tragedy that befell Hārūn (as a result of civil war, his son al-Amīn was decapitated by his own brother).

The motif ‘buried in red earth’ strengthens this link with the murder and burial of the Prophet’s grandson, but also provides a new link, to
the murder and burial of Hārūn’s adoptive grandson, ‘Alī al-Riḍā. This second link serves to compare the tragedy that befell the Prophet (his grandson was murdered by fellow Muslims so his grave became a shrine) with a second tragedy that befell Hārūn (his grandson ‘Alī al-Riḍā was murdered by his own brother so his grave became a shrine as well).

Thus, the motif ‘red earth’ is used to highlight the themes of fratricide, civil war, Muslims killing Muslims, and shedding the sacred blood of the descendants of the Prophets. These themes not only apply to the civil war between al-Ma’mūn and al-Amīn, but also to the competition between Hārūn and Mūsā. In these power struggles, the members of the Abbasid family are victims as well as perpetrators, murderous tyrants as well as oppressed innocents: brothers who shed the sacred blood of their own kin.

By using a single dream, Tabari places Hārūn’s ambiguous character against the background of the Abbasid family’s internal struggle. What has happened to Hārūn, who had been an underdog redeemer but also a cruel tyrant and who had been oppressed by his own brother but also murdered his own brother, will happen to his children.

By motif repetition and juxtaposition of akhbār, Tabari is able to indirectly pass judgment on the characters of his Tārīkh.
THREE TRAGIC RULERS

In this chapter, I will argue that Tabari not only uses dreams to indirectly pass judgment on his characters, but also to add suspense, irony and tragedy to the presentation of events in his Tārīkh. That dreams can have such a function in Arabic literature, is argued by Giovanni Canova, in a study on their role in the Arabic popular epics, where he states that dreams constitute:

...uno degli argomenti preferiti dal poeta-cantore epico (šā’ir); egli desidera coinvolgere il suo ascoltatore con l’evocazione di un fenomeno dai contorni misteriosi e affascinanti e, al tempo stesso, si fa interprete di una radicata sensazione di impotenza davanti all’ineluttabilità del destino umano.1 ...

Senza il sogno, l’impatto del destino sulle vicende umane perderebbe gran parte della sua drammaticità...Il Fato non solo colpisce implacabilmente l’eroe-vittima, ma si beffa di lui, annunciandogli attraverso il sogno quale

---

sarà la sua sorte, quasi per godere dei suoi vani sforzi per sottrarvisi. Ed è questo sordo logorìo, questa folle ribellione...a portare al massimo grado la tensione epica della narrazione.\(^3\)

[...one of the preferred topics of the epic poet-singer: he wants to get his audience involved by way of the evocation of a mysterious and fascinating phenomenon, and, at the same time, he gives voice to a deep-rooted feeling of impotence vis-à-vis the unavoidability of human destiny.

Without the dream, the impact of destiny on human life loses a large part of its drama. Fate not only implacably strikes the hero-victim, but also tricks him, announcing him by way of the dream what his destiny will be, almost in order to get pleasure from his vain efforts to save himself from it. And it is this deaf attrition, this crazy rebellion, which brings to its highest degree the epic tension of the narrative.]

One could object that Canova’s remarks on the function of dreams in the popular epics do not apply to Tabari’s chronicle, as these epics are narrative texts in the full sense of the word, while Tabari’s \(\text{Tārīkh}\) does not appear as such a continuous narrative. As we argued in chapter two, Tabari’s text seems to be nothing more than a chronological list of fragments of works by others, a list of parts which do not make up a meaningful whole that constitutes a complete narrative. Here I will argue, however, that although the \(\text{Tārīkh}\) might have the outward appearance of a dry list of events, it contains elements which are generally associated with full narrative, such as suspense and tragedy. After a definition of these terms, I will analyse the two previous dreams by al-Mahdī and Hārūn al-Rashīd from this perspective, and compare them with a third dream by al-Amīn.

**Foreshadowing, Dramatic Irony and Tragedy**

Suspense is created when there is a difference in knowledge between reader, narrator and characters. The most common form of suspense is when the reader wonders: what will happen next? To maintain the reader’s interest in this question and to gradually build up suspense, the narrator can drop subtle hints that suggest what might possibly happen later in the story, a process which is called foreshadowing.\(^4\)

In the case of predictions such as predictive dreams, both reader and character are given a hint of what might happen later. Such a prediction raises the following questions:

- What does the prediction mean (if it is encoded and needs interpretation)?

\(^3\) Canova, p. 112.

\(^4\) See also Shoshan, pp. 75-6.
Will it come true? Is it false? Should one believe in predictions at all? If it should be believed, can this predicted future be avoided, or is it inescapable?

How will the character react to these questions? Will he believe and understand the prediction? Will he accept his destiny or try to escape it?

Such a prediction, and all the questions which are raised by it, start an arch of suspense that ends when the prediction is fulfilled and these questions are answered. When the prediction is given in a dream, an additional element of foreshadowing may occur. In the case of most predictions, the omen is a pattern, for example a certain constellation of heavenly bodies in the case of astrology, or a pattern in the flight of birds in the case of ornithomancy. The relation between this specific pattern and its meaning is, in general, random, just like the relation between words and their meanings in language: these meanings have to be learned and are only known to the skilled interpreter.

In the case of dreams, however, the omen is made up of a series of images. In classical Arabic narrative, the relation between these images and their meaning is not random but metaphorical: dream image and meaning share a comparable element. The fact that the dream images are metaphors means that they contain a hint as to their interpretation. Even the reader unskilled in dream interpretation can try his hand at suggesting possible interpretations. According to Canova, this intensifies the reader’s involvement in the story.

One could say that the dream’s images, being metaphors, constitute a foreshadowing of their own interpretation.

A specific type of suspense is created through dramatic irony: when the reader knows more than the character. In the case of predictions, dramatic irony occurs when the reader understands the prediction better than the character, or when the reader knows already how things will end and how the prediction will come true.

---

5 Canova, p. 118.
It is hard to give an exact definition of ‘tragedy’, as the meaning of this concept has changed several times over the ages. We can list here a number of elements that are seen to contribute to the tragic aspect of a story:

1. The hero is a ruler who meets his downfall: he dies or otherwise loses his elevated position.
2. This end is not completely deserved: the hero is not an evil tyrant but a noble character, who has, however, a tragic flaw, which prevents him from understanding the truth, or which leads him to take wrong actions.
3. At a point in the story, anagnorisis occurs, a ‘moment of truth’. The hero recognizes the true identity of another character, and/or recognizes his own tragic flaw that had prevented him from seeing the truth earlier.
4. The hero’s destiny, his downfall, is inescapable. Everything he does to escape it is in vain. The actions he takes to escape or postpone his destiny in fact accelerate his ruin.

With these definitions of foreshadowing, dramatic irony, and tragedy in mind, I will now analyse three dreams dealing with the decease of the caliphs al-Hādī, al-Rashīd and al-Amīn, found in three consecutive obituary entries from the Tārīkh. As these obituary entries each open with the heading ‘In this year, the caliph X died’, the reader knows from the start that the hero will die, but remains, for the moment, unaware of the exact circumstances of the caliph’s death or of his succession.

**AL-MAHDĪ DREAMS OF TWO STAFFS THAT GROW LEAVES**

At a certain moment in the story of the confrontation between Mūsā al-Hādī and Hārūn, the reader is told their father al-Mahdī had dreamt that the staff of power he gave to Hārūn grew more leaves than the staff he had given to his son Mūsā. The official oneirocritic who is summoned explains this to mean that Hārūn will rule longer than his older brother Mūsā.

The attentive reader understands here that the oneirocritic’s interpretation is incomplete. As the word used for staff, qaṭīb, also means branch, the reader understands that Hārūn’s branch of the Abbasid

---

6 On anagnorisis in Arabic literature see the works by Philip Kennedy.
7 See also Vogt, pp. 272-3.
family tree will bear more fruit. This is a hint that Hārūn will not only rule longer than his older brother, but that he will also be the progenitor of all the following caliphs.

At the moment the reader is told the contents of al-Mahdī’s dream, he realizes that Mūsā had known all along that he was doomed from the outset, that his rule would be cut short and that the caliphate would not remain among his own children. The reader realizes that Mūsā had tried frantically to prevent his father’s dream from coming true and to escape his destiny. However, the actions Mūsā has undertaken to prevent this dream from coming true—obliterating Hārūn from the succession arrangements and transmitting the caliphate directly to his own son Ja’far—only accelerate the fulfillment of his destiny, as it are these actions against Hārūn and in favour of Ja’far, that force Hārūn’s advocates to kill Mūsā.

At the moment the reader knows the contents of al-Mahdī’s dream, the irony of an earlier remark by Mūsā becomes apparent. Mūsā had told his brother that their father’s dream coming true was as likely as the possibility that the branches of the tragacanth bush could be stripped of all their thousands of spiny little leaves.

“Oh Hārūn, it appears to me that you are dwelling to lengthily on the fulfillment of the dream...but before that can come to pass, you will have to strip the spiny leaves from the tragacanth bush’s branches!”

In this expression, the leaves of the tragacanth symbolise the impossibility of Hārūn becoming caliph, whereas in the dream leaves symbolise exactly the opposite: Hārūn becoming caliph as well as his descendants. Expanding on this argument, it is possible to suggest that ‘stripping the branches of the tragacanth’ is exactly what Hārūn does: by stripping Mūsā’s branch of its leaves (having Mūsā killed, preventing Ja’far b. Mūsā from becoming caliph), Hārūn himself attains the caliphate.

At the end of this khabar, the reader is told that al-Hādī died, and that he was, in fact, succeeded not by his son Ja’far b. Mūsā, but by his brother Hārūn. Later in the chronicle, the reader learns that Hārūn ruled for thirteen years as ‘al-Rashīd’, and that the caliphate remained in his line of the family. Al-Rashīd was succeeded by his three sons al-Amīn, al-Ma’mūn, and al-Mu’taṣim. From the loins of this third son would spring all the later Abbasid caliphs.

8 Tab. III, 576.
AL-RASHĪD DREAMS OF A HANDFUL OF RED EARTH

At the moment the reader of Tabari’s *Tārīkh* is presented with Hārūn al-Rashīd’s obituary entry, he already knows that the caliph has travelled to Khurasān and caught an illness that became so serious that he had to halt at the city of Tūs. When the reader is taken back by Jibrīl b. Bukhtīshū’ to the time the caliph was still at al-Raqqa, and learns that Hārūn had already been told then and there in a dream that he would be buried at Tūs, this results in dramatic irony: the reader knows more than the characters. Contrary to Hārūn and Jibrīl, the reader understands that Hārūn’s dream is a true dream and that Jibrīl’s suggestion that dreams are meaningless is wildly off the hook. To the reader, the fact that Jibrīl advices Hārūn to forget this dream ‘lest worrying about it should make him ill’, becomes highly ironic.

The moment when Hārūn, lying sick at Tūs, does remember his dream, recognizes the hand he had seen in it as belonging to his own eunuch, and when he understands the full impact of the prediction, is an example of *anagnorisis* in the full sense of the word. The hero not only recognizes the true identity of a person—he realizes now that the familiar arm from his dream was the arm of somebody who had been in his company all along—but he also understands the nature of his own tragic flaw: not having paid attention to his dream.

At the same time that the character understands he has allowed himself to be led in the wrong direction, the reader understands he has been led in the wrong direction as well. Because most dreams in Tabari’s chronicle that contain fantastic imagery later appear to have a symbolical meaning, the reader is likely to search for a symbolical interpretation of the strange image of the handful of red earth. In this case, however, such a search is in vain. When confronted with its fulfilment, the reader understands that this dream was not symbolical, but literal: exactly what was shown in the dream later happened in reality.

Moreover, such literal fulfilment was seen as a sign of the truthfulness of dreams that could convince even the most stubborn of sceptics. This is shown by the following anecdote: Like Hārūn’s physician, the caliph al-Ma’mūn used to think that all dreams were nonsense. One day, however, he dreamt something that later took place in exactly the same fashion in reality. From that day on, al-Ma’mūn no longer doubted the truth of dreams. The literal fulfilment of Hārūn’s dream is therefore an

---

additional, unquestionable token of its truthfulness: another rebuke of the physician’s bad advice and Hārūn’s bad judgement in accepting it.

At the same time, Hārūn’s dream resembles Muhammad’s dream of red earth, which dealt with the murder and decapitation of his grandson. By way of this resemblance, Hārūn’s dream foreshadows events treated in later entries: the civil war between Hārūn’s two sons that would break out after the caliph’s death and would result in the decapitation of Hārūn’s son al-Amīn by his own brother. Just as al-Mahdī’s dream not only foreshadows what will happen after al-Hādī’s death but also foretells what will happen after al-Rashīd’s death, so al-Rashīd’s dream not only predicts where he himself will die, but also foreshadows how the next caliph al-Amīn will die.

AL-AMĪN DREAMS HIS HAT FALLS OFF

Hārūn, who wanted to prevent his sons from quarrelling about the succession as he himself had quarrelled with his brother Mūsā, had decided to divide the empire between his two sons. Hārūn appointed his son by a free Arab Hashimit woman as caliph in Baghdād, where this son ruled as ‘al-Amīn’. Al-Amīn’s older half-brother, ‘Abdallāh, who was Hārūn’s son by a Persian slave woman and who would later become known as al-Maḥmūd, was appointed as ruler over Khurāsān.

These arrangements, however, were in vain, for after Hārūn’s death a full-scale civil war broke out between the two sons. Al-Amīn was besieged in Baghdad by the generals of his brother, Tāhir and Harthama. The Abbasid capital was bombarded with siege engines, until al-Amīn was not able to defend his position anymore. In al-Amīn’s obituary entry, we are presented with a report told by the son of one of al-Amīn’s advisors, who had been accompanying his father and thus witnessed the caliph’s last days. This eyewitness tells us that al-Amīn was advised to break through the encirclement, to escape to Syria and to raise a new army there.

When the enemy general Tāhir heard of this escape plan, he bribed some of al-Amīn’s advisors to convince the caliph to abandon the escape plan and to surrender himself officially to one of the two generals. Al-Amīn lets himself be convinced, upon which discussion broke out as to which general the caliph should officially surrender: Tāhir or Harthama. Some advisors preferred Tāhir, but al-Amīn said he felt uneasy

10 See also Vogt, pp. 273-6.
11 Tabari, III, p. 913.
about Tahir because of a dream. Al-Amīn had dreamt he was standing on top of a very thick and high brick wall, wearing his official black clothes and his qalansuwa, a tall conical hat.\textsuperscript{12} Suddenly, Tahir started to pound the base of the wall: al-Amīn tumbled down and his hat fell off his head.

Al-Amīn fails to summon an interpreter and have his dream explained. This is unwise, for apparently, the caliph does not fully grasp the meaning of the falling qalansuwa, for he only says that he feels ‘uneasy’ about Tahir. A well-informed reader, however, would have understood that a qalansuwa falling off somebody’s head means that person is about to die. Elsewhere in Tabari’s chronicle, this tall hat falling off signifies impending death: Prior to the battle of Šiffin, Ali’s cavalry crosses a bridge over the Euphrates. In the jostling that results, the qalansuwas of two men fall off their heads. The men dismount to pick them up, whereupon one recites to the other: ‘If, as is said, the augur’s idea is true / I shall be killed shortly and so will you.’ A little while later, both men die in battle, fighting for Ali at Šiffin.\textsuperscript{13} The caliph al-Amīn, not as insightful as these two cavalrymen, does not grasp that his dream predicts that he will be killed. The dream has, however, made him feel somewhat uneasy about Tahir, so he decides to surrender to the other general Harthama.

After al-Amīn’s account of his dream as related by the son of his advisor, a report by another narrator is introduced, which allows the perspective to change from the camp of al-Amīn to that of Tahir. This second reporter relates that when Tahir got the news that al-Amīn had decided to deliver himself with his officers to Harthama, he became jealous. Tahir was apparently of the opinion that the honour of the caliph officially surrendering to his victor, should befall him, and not his rival Harthama. Tahir lays an ambush. At night, Harthama sends a boat to pick up al-Amīn. The caliph and his officers embark the ship, but Tahir’s men bombard it with stones. The boat sinks and al-Amīn falls overboard, but he swims to the wrong bank of the river where he is captured, all alone and soaking wet, by Tahir’s men who kill him and cut off his head.

Al-Amīn’s tragic flaw consists of listening to bad advisors, failing to have his dream interpreted, not understanding the full impact of the

\textsuperscript{12} Qalansuwas were high hats which, due to fashion, became so tall in the course of time, that the caliph al-Musta’in decreed some fifty years after al-Amīn that they should not exceed an official maximum height. Suyūṭī, \textit{History of the Caliphs}, trans. H.S. Jarrett (Amsterdam: Oriental, 1970), p. 22.

\textsuperscript{13} Tabari, I, p. 3260, translation G.R. Hawting. See also Shoshan, p. 70.
dream and trying to escape his predicted destiny. His decision to surrender to Harthama in order to escape from Ṭāhir drives him directly into the latter’s arms: instead of an official surrender in the company of his officers, al-Amīn is captured all alone and executed on the spot. The tall qalansuwa falling off now proves to have been a graphic preview of his decapitation.

THREE TRAGIC RULERS

Concluding, we can say that the dreams in these three obituary entries have the following effect: they turn the deaths of three Abbasid caliphs into the downfall of tragic heroes. All three caliphs die prematurely: al-Hādī, according to the rumours, is murdered at an early age; al-Rashīd dies as the result of an illness caught while travelling; and al-Amīn is decapitated. al-Hādī and al-Amīn, the two caliphs who die violent deaths, not only lose their lives but also fail to bequeath the caliphate to their own children. These Abbasid rulers, however, are not as evil as heathen tyrants, such as Pharaoh or the Umayyads, who meet their well-deserved punishment after a reign of idolatry and oppression. al-Hādī, al-Rashīd and al-Amīn have just one tragic flaw, which in all three cases comes down to the same defect: not being able to deal with the revealed truth that is exposed to them in dreams.

- al-Hādī refuses to believe his father’s dream will come true;
- al-Rashīd lets himself be convinced that his dream is false and consequently forgets it;
- al-Amīn refrains from having his dream fully explained by an interpreter, and consequently does not grasp its full impact.

Moreover, all three characters fail to accept the destiny announced to them in these dreams, thereby demonstrating their failure to live up to the standards of such men as al-Ḥusayn b. Abī Ṭālib, who accepted his foretold death with almost superhuman resignation. In addition, the actions these three caliphs undertake in order to postpone, avert, or completely ignore their destiny, have opposite effects: instead of lengthening their lives, these actions shorten it and make it more miserable.

14 See also Shoshan, p. 233 ff.
- al-Hādī’s efforts to prevent his brother from becoming caliph and to put his own son on the throne, contrary to what had been announced in the dream, force Hārūn and his supporters to put an end to these efforts by prematurely terminating al-Hādī’s caliphate;
- al-Rashīd lets himself be convinced that he should forget his dream lest worrying about it would make him sick, but because he has forgotten his dream, he blindly embarks on a journey during which he contracts the fatal illness that causes his demise;
- al-Amīn, by surrendering to Harthama in order to escape from being humiliated by Tāhir—as announced in his dream—provokes Tāhir’s jealousy which leads to his immediate decapitation.

Although meeting his end prematurely, the one ruler who does not die a violent death and who is able to bequeath the caliphate to his own children, is Hārūn al-Rashīd. It is also this caliph who is blessed with a moment of anagnorisis, where he recognizes his own tragic flaw and the full meaning of his dream.

Just as dreams are central in revealing the tragic flaws and in provoking the tragic behaviour of these characters, dreams are instrumental in creating the particular discrepancy in knowledge between reader and character that results in dramatic irony. In the case of al-Hādī and al-Amīn, the attentive reader has a more complete understanding of the dream’s meaning than the characters, and in the case of al-Rashīd, the reader knows that the caliph should not ignore and forget his dream.

- In the case of al-Hādī, the reader understands that the leaf-covered branch not only means that Hārūn will rule longer, but also that the caliphate will remain exclusively among the latter’s offspring;
- In the case of al-Amīn, the reader understands that the falling qalansuwa means that the caliph will be killed, and that the latter should therefore feel more than a little uneasy about Tāhir;
- In the case of al-Rashīd, the reader knows from the previous entry that the caliph will fall sick at the eastern city of Tūs. With this knowledge in mind, the reader has to watch the characters stumble in the dark and accumulate bad decision upon bad decision: from the advice to ignore the dream, lest worry-
ing about it would make the caliph sick, to the subsequent decision to travel east.
In their obituary entries, meant to present a final verdict on their life, three Abbasid caliphs are presented as tragically flawed rulers, blind to the prophetic revelations that are bestowed on them. One might argue that the image of the flawed behaviour of al-Hādī and al-Amīn was the result of propaganda in favour of their rivals within the dynasty itself, i.e. propaganda in favour of their brothers al-Rashīd and al-Ma’mūn.\footnote{That dreams by Abbasid caliphs were originally created as propaganda material is argued by Lassner, \textit{Islamic Revolution}, pp. 19-24.} Al-Rashīd himself, however, is also depicted as a ruler with all too human flaws. Propaganda, therefore, can never have been the sole purpose of the reports on these caliphs. These reports were created, and consequently selected by Tabari for his chronicle, in order to captivate readers by the use of time-honoured literary devices: suspense, a certain amount of irony, and a strong element of tragedy.

To a superficial beholder, Tabari’s chronicle has the appearance of a catalogue, a list of unrelated events. However, the analysis of the narratological function of the three dreams treated in this chapter, has shown that dreams were used to surpass this list-structure, by creating links to other entries and, more importantly, by providing them with a background of suspense and tragedy. Dream reports are used in Tabari’s chronicle to tell a story, as captivating and dramatic as possible.
This book’s ambition has been to modify the ‘bewilderment’ and ‘infuriation’ of modern scholars with regard to Tabari’s History of Prophets and Kings, a text that allegedly demonstrates his ‘exasperating paratactical method’, so ‘repetitive, disjointed, cryptic’ and ‘apparently pointless’ that narrative clarity and psychological plausibility are ‘destroyed’ and ‘undermined’. My analysis has demonstrated that these exclamations have been testimonies to the scholarly failure to properly interpret the author’s rhetorical strategies. My main conclusion has been that Tabari takes great pains to appear not to be telling a story – indeed, to appear as a bad storyteller. Behind his façade of objective reporting, however, there are sophisticated narrative techniques at work.

This thesis has presented Tabari as a good storyteller and a convincing historian, whose standards of history writing can not only be compared to those of a Western audience schooled in biblical history, but can also be understood and appreciated by such an audience. His main

\footnote{I thank Thijs Weststeijn for his invaluable help in the writing of this conclusion.}
rhetorical strategy was to appear as nothing more than the last transmitter, and thereby seem authoritative, while at the same time providing his own implicit judgement of events, indirectly highlighting historical parallels and captivating the unwitting reader with added suspense and drama. Analyzing his implicit strategies of storytelling reveals that his ideas about the historian’s task and narrative are intricately interwoven with Judaic and Christian notions of sacred history, a conclusion that is reinforced by Tabari’s repeated references, implicit as well as explicit, to biblical themes.

The key to this conclusion has been the narratological analysis of the function of dream reports in the History of Prophets and Kings. In the sober genre of classical Arabic historiography, stringent with accounts of miracles, theurgy or sortilege, dream reports stand out as red flags through their conspicuous inclusion of symbolism and the supernatural. As this thesis has revealed, Tabari included them for clear reasons: dream reports are perfectly suited for **implicit** storytelling.

We started out by analyzing the meaning of the term *tārīkh* in the title of Tabari’s work. While this term is generally rendered as ‘history’ in the sense of a ‘story about past events’, we have suggested two additional interpretations, based on our analysis of the narrative structure of his work. First, the presentation of key events of the *Tārīkh* in a rigid chronological order, without explicit commentary, suggests this text is nothing more than a list of events. According to this interpretation, Tabari’s objective was to provide his readers information about relative and exact chronology: the term *tārīkh* can simply be translated as ‘chronology’. A second interpretation focuses on elements of the text that foreground the catalogue aspect of Tabari’s work: the *Tārīkh* as a database of *akhbār*, where reports are central, not the events behind them. According to this interpretation, the word *tārīkh* refers to the fact that the work can be seen as a catalogue of chronologically arranged reports.

Much of the confusion experienced by Tabari’s modern readers can be clarified by taking into account the narratological distinction between the real life author Tabari and the persona of the primary narrator. Tabari gave his work the outward appearance of a compendium of quotations from the works of others, where the entries are presented by a detached primary narrator who merely lists and who refrains from commentary. The reason that Tabari gave his *Tārīkh* this format was **not** that he lacked storytelling abilities or had no authorial opinion. To the contrary, Tabari did have a strong personal view on the events of the past. Likewise, the reason that he refrained from stating this opinion directly was **not** that he felt restricted by the taboos of his time and did
Dreams and Implicit Storytelling

not dare to make his point of view public. Tabari gave his Tārīkh the format of a catalogue as a conscious rhetorical choice, to bring his opinion across in a more effective way, and render his authorial interpretation of events more convincing.

Aware that readers tend to identify the primary narrator of a text with its author, Tabari consciously gave the primary narrator of his Tārīkh an uninvolved, sober style. He knew that this would make himself appear, due to the conventions of his time, as an authoritative conveyor of the truth about the past. However, using implicit storytelling techniques, Tabari could have it both ways. Hiding behind the catalogue format, his detached primary narrator, and a multitude of akhbār reporters, Tabari was able to appear perfectly neutral and objective, while at the same time passing scathing judgements on his characters and captivating his readers with suspense and tragedy. Among the strategies Tabari used for such implicit storytelling was motif repetition and, more particular, the inclusion of dreams.

As dream reports offered the narrator several possibilities to express his opinion in an indirect way, dreams were essential to a text’s claim to scholarly objectivity. By using dreams, the narrator was able to express an opinion without committing a solecism in the genre of the classical Arabic chronicle. Moreover, he was able to add a semblance of objectivity while hiding behind several ‘layers of reportage’: in the case of dream reports, the primary narrator in the Tārīkh may quote an eyewitness who in turn quotes a character who reports an event he witnessed; the dreamer recounts a dream he saw. In case the dream is explained, the eyewitness in turn quotes an additional character (the dream interpreter) who translates the dream’s message. Without explicating a point of view, the dreamer reports an event he witnessed in his sleep, the interpreter simply translates what others experienced. This way, the author himself can hide behind at least five layers of purportedly objective reportage.

We should note, however, that in the case of dream reports, at the same time that the author’s judgement is hidden under so many layers, it is also heavily foregrounded. More than regular historical events, dream reports appealed to the classical Arabic reader’s wish for interpretation. When the contents of a dream were presented, Tabari’s readers knew that these contents constitute a message in need of clarification. As dreams were deemed to come from the supernatural realm, their message was always important. Moreover (as our chapter six has made clear in particular), in contrast to other predictions such as astrological forecasts, in classical Arabic prose texts the relation between the dream and
its meaning was metaphorical: this means that most readers were able
to decipher the dream themselves.

In addition, the judgment offered by dreams is also highly authoritative. A report of a dream or its deciphering by a professional interpreter was not judged as the expression of individual opinion, but as an objective account of an event that really happened. No classical Arabic author ever expressed doubt about the possibility that dreams could contain truthful messages. Indeed, dreambooks and philosophical treatises provided the interpretation of these nocturnal phenomena with an aura of scholarly objectivity and authority. Dreams were related to prophecy; they were interpreted as messages sent by God and expressions of His infallible judgment.

Finally, dreams, as the source material for divination, are eminently suited not only to indirectly highlight events but also, as prolepsis, to provide connections between different events. In addition, dreams provide storytelling opportunities on a more aesthetic or entertaining level. Within the conventions that resulted in the dry style of a work such as the Tārīkh—both the detached summary by the primary narrator and the 'hard-boiled' reportage by the khabar transmitters—a dream report offered narrators and readers the opportunity to indulge in metaphor, under the pretense of an unadorned and matter-of-fact reportage of actual events. As predictions, dreams are eminently suited as foreshadowing, thereby adding suspense and tragedy to the alleged dry presentation of events. As the various chapters of this thesis demonstrate in synthesis, dreams allowed the historiographer to hide behind a mask of scholarly objectivity while at the same time providing him with a singular spectrum of narrative opportunities for which the genre had no place elsewhere.

As the thesis demonstrates in detail how association and juxtaposition were means of telling an implicit story (chapters four and five) and how suspense and tragedy were added to the apparently dry presentation of events through accounts of predictive dreams (chapter six), we can conclude here that in the case of Tabari's text, the term tārīkh can indeed be translated as 'story about past event', i.e. as 'history'.

As is well known, Tabari incorporated biblical material into his Tārīkh. Also common knowledge is the fact that Muhammad was presented as the successor to the earlier prophets Joseph, Moses, Daniel and Jesus; indeed, Islam was presented as the legitimate successor to the earlier monotheist religions Judaism and Christianity. Chapter three has revealed that Tabari used a specific narrative technique to reinforce this doctrine: a deliberate use of motif repetition. The chapter has focused
on a motif which returns no less than six times, and which is rooted in both the Koran and the Old Testament: A ruler has a dream that can only be interpreted by a foreigner who descends from Abraham. By way of motif repetition, Tabari links his episodes about post-biblical prophets and post-biblical tyrants to biblical stories. Doing this, he suggests that the *Tārīkh* is a sequel to the Old and New Testaments and that its post-biblical characters are legitimate heirs to biblical predecessors.

This 'tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter' motif is repeated in the accounts of dreams dreamed by a number of pre-Islamic rulers: the Egyptian pharaohs from the time of Joseph and Moses; the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar; the Arab king Rabī'a b. Naṣr; and, from the time of Muhammad, the Persian and Byzantine emperors Anūsharwān and Heraclius. The reuse of known motifs allows the narrator to refrain from directly explicating the typology. Instead, by incorporating motifs from the stories about earlier prophets, Joseph and Moses, in his story of Muhammad, he only suggests to the reader the possibility of comparing the Prophet of Islam to these biblical figures. The narrator leaves it to the reader to draw his own conclusions based on such a comparison. Motif repetition is an indirect way to express the notion of Muhammad's biblical inheritance. As the primary narrator of Tabari's *Ṭārīkh* abstained from directly linking, comparing and judging events in his own words, motif repetition allowed the author to indirectly steer the reader's interpretation. Apparently, even in the pre-Islamic part of his *Ṭārīkh*, where Tabari had not yet restrained himself by the strict catalogue structure of unconnected events but had the freedom to tell longer stories, he saw it fit to adopt indirect narrative strategies.

In addition, we demonstrated how motifs from the 'tyrant vs. Abrahamite interpreter' cluster are used to show that in the course of pre-Islamic history as told in the *Ṭārīkh*, there is not only repetition, but also change. In the course of history the opposition between evil tyrant and good interpreter gradually diminishes. Tabari suggests that history repeats itself every time a true prophet is sent by God: time and again, each prophet has to oppose the tyrant of his day who appears as an incarnation of previous tyrants. However, in the *Ṭārīkh*, whereas Pharaoh is the epitome of evil tyranny, Rabī'a b. Naṣr is already less oppressive and arrogant, and Anūsharwān is able to understand the meaning of at least a part of his dream, without consulting interpreters. This development towards tyrants being less evil and more insightful culminates in the depiction of Heraclius as the 'ideal ruler', who almost converts to Islam.

We have seen that the interpreter's role changes as well. In the Old Testament, the interpreters Joseph and Daniel are the heroes of their
respective episodes who rise from slavery to high positions in the tyrant’s service. Starting with the New Testament story of Herod, however, the true heroes are not the interpreters, but the prophets whose coming they announce. In the time of Rabī‘a b. Naṣr, after explaining the king’s dream, the interpreters do not play any further role in that particular episode. In the time of Anūsharwān, the interpreter only provides a corroboration of what the tyrant has already grasped by himself. Again the process culminates in the episode of Heraclius, where the two Abrahamites merely inadvertently provide the ruler the clues to interpret his own dream. As the tyrants become wiser and the interpreters less important, the opposite extremes tyrant and Abrahamite gradually grow closer to each other, because the rulers adopts qualities that were initially the prerequisite of the Abrahamites, such as insight in dreams.

Chapters four, five and six were devoted to the dreams of three Abbasid caliphs from the catalogue section of the Tārīkh, al-Mahdī, al-Rashīd and al-Amīn. Chapters four and five have analyzed how the biblical motifs used in the pre-Islamic section of the Tārīkh are also used in the Islamic section to implicitly judge caliphs and their actions. The pre-Islamic struggle between good and evil, between tyrants and Abrahamite redeemers, continues in the Islamic section as a struggle within the Abbasid dynasty. The competition between two Abbasid pretenders to the throne, Mūsā and Hārūn, is cast as a struggle between blind tyrant and wise redeemer. Hārūn himself develops during his lifetime from an underdog liberator into a blind and cruel oppressor. The process of gradual rapprochement between ruler and Abrahamite, as noted in our analysis of the pre-Islamic section, has resulted in the fusion of these two characters into one person, when each Abbasid caliph is depicted as the bearer of a double heritage: as head of the umma, that of Abrahamite descendant of the prophets, and as head of state of a large Near Eastern empire, that of successor to the pre-Islamic tyrants. The difficulty of coping with this double heritage is poignantly illustrated by the dreams of these Abbasid caliphs and the way they try to handle the truth that is revealed to them.

Our analysis of al-Mahdī’s dream in chapter four has shown that motifs connected to the ‘tyrant vs. Abrahamite’ dream, as well as another biblical motif, the staff that miraculously grows leaves, are used to compare Mūsā al-Hādī and his brother Hārūn with pre-Islamic prophets and tyrants and thereby to implicitly pass judgment on their actions.
Our analysis of al-Rashīd’s dream in chapter five has shown how a number of techniques are used to indirectly pass judgment on Hārūn al-Rashīd, now that he has become caliph himself. By way of the juxtaposition of akhbār, a flashback, characters who openly link events from different entries, and the repetition of motifs mentioned in the previous khabār, Hārūn’s death is linked to the unjust and cruel way he dealt with the innocent brother of a rebel. By way of the ‘red earth’ motif, Hārūn is compared to Muhammad, and the murders of his son al-Amīn and his grandson al-Riḍā linked to the murder of the Prophet’s grandson al-Ḥusayn. The children of both Prophet and caliph were murdered by their Muslim brethren, and both their grandchildren were be buried in blood-drenched soil. The red earth motif is used to illustrate the themes of fratricide and civil war.

In both cases the judgement and explanation offered by the dream is hidden under a deceptive layer of objective reporting. Again we can conclude that, within the conventions of the chronicle, dreams provide an ideal tool by which the author can offer his opinion indirectly.

In chapter six it is argued that dreams are not only used to cast judgement on characters and their actions, but also to add suspense and tragedy to the deceptively dry presentation of events. The three obituary entries of the caliphs al-Hādī, al-Rashīd and al-Amīn contain dreams with the same import: they turn the deaths of these Abbasid caliphs into the downfall of tragic heroes. Here, a pattern is revealed returning in the aforementioned accounts of al-Mahdi’s dream about the staffs growing leaves, al-Rashid’s dream of a handful of read earth, and, in addition, al-Amīn dreaming that his hat falls off. The pattern that these three dreams share is one of tragedy. All three caliphs die prematurely: al-Hādī is murdered at an early age; al-Rashīd dies from an illness caught travelling; and al-Amīn is decapitated. These Abbasid rulers, however, are not pagan tyrants, such as Pharaoh or the Umayyads who, in Tabari’s chronicle, meet their well-deserved punishment after a reign of unbelief and oppression. Hādī, Rashīd and Amīn share just one tragic flaw: not being able to deal with the revealed truth that is exposed to them in dreams. All three characters misunderstand the dreams that concern them and fail to accept the destiny announced to them. In addition, the actions these three caliphs undertake in order to postpone, avert, or completely ignore their destiny, have opposite results: instead of lengthening their lives, these actions shorten it and make it more miserable. The one ruler who does not die a violent death and who manages to bequeath the caliphate to his offspring, is Hārūn al-Rashīd: he is blessed with a moment of anagnorisis, where he recognizes his own tragic flaw and the full meaning of his dream.
The comparison of these three dream reports has made clear that just as dreams may reveal tragic flaws and provoke the tragic behaviour of characters, they are instrumental in creating the particular discrepancy in knowledge between reader and character that results in dramatic irony.

All this disproves the assumption that Tabari was nothing but an uncreative compiler who did not understand the reports he included. The analysis of the narratological function of the three dreams treated in this chapter demonstrated that the Tārīkh is more than a catalogue: dreams create links between different entries and provide them with a background of suspense and tragedy. Tabari, after all, does behave the way a modern audience expects an historian to behave: he highlights events that are more important than others, he provides connections between earlier and later events, he judges the actions of historical characters, and he situates all these events in a larger pattern that governs the course of history.

In synthesis, my analyses of the various dream reports have pointed out how narrative parallels and subtle adjustments of the reader’s opinions return at various moments in Tabari’s History of Prophets and Kings. This places the chronicle firmly within the tradition of Judaic and Christian sacred history writing. The comparison of motifs from the Tārīkh with motifs from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which yielded interesting results in this case, promises a fruitful inroad for further research. More specifically, Tabari’s take on dreams could be provided with further context by casting out the net more widely to include not only his use of other types of predictions but also additional classical Arabic texts on predictions in relation to concepts of history and predestination.

For the moment, Vogt and Robinson’s earlier intuitions have been vindicated that dream reports are important narrative moments in Tabari’s Tārīkh. In fact, as dreams have turned out to be so well suited to his project of implicit storytelling, it can be concluded that they constitute key passages that are essential to our understanding of Tabari’s vision of history. As predictive dreams have appeared instrumental in provoking a tragic response from characters and in creating dramatic irony, my conclusions support those of Shoshan who makes Tabari an author of suspense and tragedy. Most importantly, pointing out some of Tabari’s implicit narrative strategies throws new light on the au-

---

2 Robinson, pp. 150-52; Vogt, p. 286.
3 Shoshan, pp. 233-52.
Dreams and Implicit Storytelling

The dream reports reveal an inherent cohesion in Tabari’s chronicle. Motifs from biblical history recur in the pre-Islamic as well as in the Islamic parts of the *Tārīkh*, drawing implicit comparisons between episodes that are hundreds of pages apart.

These observations substantially modify Khalidi’s conclusion that the pre-Islamic and Islamic parts of Tabari’s work are fundamentally disparate. As my analysis of dream reports has revealed, the struggle between prophets and tyrants forms a cohesive factor throughout the entire work. As much more than a mere compiler, throughout the chronicle Tabari highlighted the parallels when history repeats itself in the story of rulers—regardless of whether they are pre-Islamic kings or Islamic caliphs—who are given the choice between good and bad governance. Throughout the entire chronicle, biblical time continues from pre-Islamic to Islamic history, and the battle between good and evil continues along biblical lines as well. In the course of ages, however, this battle becomes more ambiguous. Rulers are no longer presented as either good or evil, but as ambivalent and tragic characters. For the rest is the difference between the pre-Islamic and Islamic parts only one of narrative structure: there is one ideological framework underlying the chronicle in its entirety. Tabari’s *History of Prophets and Kings* was written in fairly literal reaction to, not to say rivalry with, history writing in the Judaeo-Christian world: modern scholarship should not hesitate to bring analytic traditions developed for modern European and American writing, such as narratology, to bear on this ‘bewildering’ work.

---

4 Khalidi, p. 79-80.
Abbreviations

BSOAS = Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
EI² = Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edition
IJMES = International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies
IOS = Israel Oriental Studies
JAIS = Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies (?)
JAOS = Journal of the American Oriental Society
JRAS = Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society
OPSAS = Occasional Papers of the School of Abbasid Studies
QSA = Quaderni di Studi Arabi
RSO = Rivista degli Studi Orientali
SI = Studia Islamica
ZDMG = Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft

Bibliography


Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, *Musnad* (Cairo, 1313 H).


Bosworth, C.E., ‘al-Ṭabarī’, *EI²*.


Daiber, Hans & Toufic Fahd, ‘Ru’yā’, EF.


Humphreys, R. Stephen, ‘Ta’rīkh’, *EI²*.


Khalidi, Tarif, Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period (Cambridge UP, 1994).


Lichtenstadter, Ilse, Introduction to Classical Arabic Literature, with Selections from Representative Works in English Translation (New York: Twayne, 1974).


Muth, Franz-Christoph, Die Annalen von aṭ-Ṭabarī im Spiegel der europäischen Bearbeitungen (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1983).


Waldman, Marilyn Robinson, Toward a Theory of Historical Narrative: A Case Study in Perso-Islamicate Historiography (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1980).


A Handful of Red Earth: Dreams of Rulers in Tabari’s *History of Prophets and Kings*

A narratological analysis of Tabari’s *History* shows that the impression of uninvolved objectivity offered by this work is merely a façade. Indirect narrative techniques, such as motif repetition and dreams, are used to tell a dramatic story and pass scathing judgement on its characters.

Tabari’s *History of Prophets and Kings*, an Arabic universal chronicle which deals with the time from Creation until the 10th century AD, is indispensable for our knowledge of the first three centuries of Islam. The work, however, puzzles modern scholars, for it does not comply with what a contemporary reader, on the basis of modern, classical Greco-roman or even biblical examples, expects from a proper piece of history writing. The work appears to lack a unifying narrative thread; the author seems to abstain from any commentary on the sources he has used, any moral judgment of historical characters, and any explanation of the importance, the possible cause or the coherence of events. Countless facts are presented in the eight thousand pages of text that make up the work, but no relationships seem to be established between them whatsoever.

Another disturbing anomaly is the fact that among these apparently factual accounts of realistic events, the reader finds obvious signs of outright invention: predictive dreams that are filled with fantastic content and miraculously come true. As it is highly probable that we will never be able to find out what Tabari’s sources looked like, or ascertain how reliable these materials are for a reconstruction of what has actually happened, these stylistic peculiarities appear insolvable.

Here, however, a way out is provided by a method from the field of literary studies: narratology. The analysis of narrative techniques helps us to differentiate between the flesh-and-blood author Tabari and his primary narrator, a paper persona created by this author. Likewise, it reminds us that all narrators, both primary and secondary, can be used by the author to bring across his opinion indirectly; that there are a number of techniques for indirect storytelling.

A narratological analysis of the structure of the Islamic part of the *History* shows that Tabari gave his work the outward appearance of a catalogue: a database of chronologically arranged *akhbār*, eyewitness accounts of past events. Using the conventions of classical Arabic historiography, he chose this catalogue format for rhetorical effect: in order
to appear as the most reliable transmitter of materials about the past. Behind this façade of dry, scholarly objectivity, however, a dramatic story is told, using indirect narrative techniques, such as motif repetition and dreams. Within the conventions of classical Arabic historiography, dreams are not only eminently suited to pass judgment indirectly, but also to build up suspense and present the course of events from a tragic perspective.

It turns out that, after all, Tabari does what we expect from a historian. By way of motif repetition, events are highlighted, commented upon, compared to previous and subsequent events and even placed in a broader framework. A number of narrative motifs, related to the struggle between a descendant of Abraham and an unbelieving tyrant, recur throughout the entire text of Tabari’s History, and are found in both the pre-Islamic and the Islamic parts of the work. This recurrence of motifs throughout the entire text adds to the unity of the work’s composition and shows that the course of history is not chaotic but evolves along a certain pattern. Moreover, in Tabari’s work recurring motifs are not only used to illustrate stale repetition, but also development. In the course of the pre-Islamic struggle between prophets and tyrants, the two opposites gradually grow closer to each other. The tyrant becomes less cruel and develops some prophetic qualities, such as insight in dreams. The two extremes eventually merge into one person: the Abbasid caliph, and the struggle between prophets and tyrants continues within one family, sometimes even within a single caliph.
NEDERLANDSE SAMENVATTING

Een handvol rode aarde: Dromen van heersers in Tabari’s *Geschiedenis van profeten en koningen*

Na een narratologische analyse van Tabari’s *Geschiedenis van profeten en koningen* blijkt de indruk van afstandelijke objectiviteit die dit werk biedt slechts een façade: via indirecte verteltechnieken, zoals motiefherhaling en het gebruik van dromen, wordt wel degelijk commentaar op de gebeurtenissen geleverd en wordt getracht een zo dramatisch en spannend mogelijk verhaal te vertellen.

Tabari’s Arabische wereldkroniek, gewijd aan de tijd vanaf de Schepping tot de 10e eeuw na Chr., is een onmisbare bron voor kennis van de eerste drie eeuwen van de Islam. Toch is dit werk voor moderne onderzoekers zeer problematisch: het beantwoordt niet aan wat op basis van moderne, antieke of zelfs bijbelse geschiedschrijving van een geschiedwerk verwacht kan worden. Een rode draad lijkt geheel te ontbreken; de auteur lijkt zich niet alleen te onthouden van commentaar op de door hem gebruikte bronnen, maar ook van ieder (moreel) oordeel over personages en iedere verklaring van het belang, de mogelijke oorzaak of de bredere samenhang van gebeurtenissen. Tussen de talloze feiten die in dit achtduizend pagina’s tellende werk de revue passeren, lijkt, behalve een rigide chronologisch raamwerk, geen enkel onderling verband gelegd te worden. Met andere woorden: er lijkt geen verhaal te worden verteld. Een tweede storende anomalie is het feit dat in deze tekst, temidden van realistische en in zakelijke, onopgesmukte stijl weergegeven gebeurtenissen, een aantal voorspelende dromen met fantastische inhoud is opgenomen: in het oog springende voorbeelden van pure inventie. En omdat we na alle waarschijnlijkheid nooit zullen kunnen achterhalen hoe de bronnen eruit zagen waarop de auteur Tabari zich heeft gebaseerd, en nooit te weten zullen komen hoe betrouwbaar dit materiaal eigenlijk is voor reconstructie van wat er daadwerkelijk gebeurde, lijken deze stilistische problemen bijkans onoplosbaar.

Verheldering brengt in dit geval een literatuurwetenschappelijke methode: de narratologie. Deze leer van de verteltechniek wijst ons niet alleen op het onderscheid tussen de auteur Tabari, een mens van vlees en bloed, en zijn primaire verteller, een persona gecreëerd door die auteur voor de duur van deze ene tekst, maar wijst ons vooral op het feit dat alle vertellers, zowel primaire als secundaire, gebruikt kunnen worden door die auteur om indirect zijn eigen visie weer te geven.
Narratologie maakt duidelijk dat de auteur allerlei indirecte vertelttechnieken ter beschikking staan.

Uit een narratologische analyse van de structuur van het islamitische gedeelte van de Geschiedenis van profeten en koningen blijkt dat Tabari zijn werk de uiterlijke vorm heeft gegeven van een catalogus: een chronologisch gerangschikte database van akhābār, mondeling overleverde ooggetuigenverslagen. Tabari heeft deze catalogusvorm gekozen om, gebruik makend van de conventies van de klassieke Arabische historiografie, een retorisch effect te bewerkstelligen: de indruk te wekken dat hij een zo betrouwbaar mogelijke overleveraar van materiaal uit het verleden is. Achter deze façade van objectiviteit wordt echter wel degelijk een verhaal verteld. Tot de indirecte vertelttechnieken die hiertoe ingezet worden behoren motiefherhaling en het gebruik van dromen. Deze in het oog springende elementen blijken geen storende uitzonderingen maar juist sleutelpassages van Tabari’s kroniek: dromen zijn niet alleen uitermate geschikt om binnen de conventies van de klassieke Arabische geschiedschrijving op indirecte wijze een oordeel te vellen, maar ook om spanning op te bouwen en de loop der gebeurtenissen te presenteren vanuit een tragisch perspectief.

Het blijkt dat, middels motiefherhaling, bepaalde gebeurtenissen wel degelijk worden uitgelicht, van commentaar voorzien, vergeleken met voorafgaande en volgende gebeurtenissen, en zelfs in een breder kader geplaatst: Tabari treedt wel degelijk op zoals vanuit modern oogpunt van een geschiedschrijver verwacht kan worden. Uit de narratologische analyse van een aantal heerserdromen uit Tabari’s kroniek blijkt dat een aantal vertelmotieven, gerelateerd aan de strijd tussen een afstammeling van Abraham en een ongelovige tiran, steeds terugkeert door de gehele tekst van dit werk, zowel in het pre-islamitische als in het islamitische gedeelte. Deze herhaling van motieven door de gehele tekst verleent het werk niet alleen eenheid van compositie maar geeft ook aan dat de geschiedenis niet chaotisch is: ze verloopt volgens een bepaald patroon. In Tabari’s werk blijkt bovendien dat deze motieven worden ingezet om niet alleen herhaling aan te geven, maar ook een ontwikkeling. In de loop van de pre-islamitische strijd tussen profeten en tirannen groeien profeet en tiran geleidelijk naar elkaar toe: de tiran wordt minder wreed en neemt uiteindelijk eigenschappen van de profeet over, zoals inzicht in dromen. Uiteindelijk verenigen tiran en profeet zich in één persoon: de Abbasidische kalief, en zet de strijd tussen profeten en tirannen zich voort binnen één geslacht en in sommige gevallen binnen één kalief.


II. In an Islamic context, the classical Arabic *ru’yā* always means ‘dream’ (during sleep) and never ‘waking vision’. The Islamic theory of prophecy and divine inspiration states that the soul of normal humans can only receive immaterial images of supernatural origin during sleep, for it is only then that the senses are inactive and stop distracting the soul with their input.

There are two reasons why Western translators tend to render *ru’yā* as ‘vision’. Firstly, as *ru’yā* is derived from the verb *ra’a*, with as primary meaning ‘to see’, translators chose to translate *ru’yā* with a noun that is likewise derived from a verb meaning ‘to see’: the Latin *videre*, hence ‘vision’. Secondly, because in Medieval European Christianity a waking vision was considered more truthful than a dream, this hierarchical distinction between vision and dream in Christianity is mistakenly considered as the exact equivalent of the hierarchical distinction between *ru’yā* (sound dream) and *hulm* (false dream) in classical Arabic.

III. In an Islamic context, it is incorrect to label belief in predictive dreams and their interpretation as superstition. The assumption that external truths can be known through dreams has always been an integral part of Islamic ‘orthodoxy’.

IV. The absence of dreams by Umayyad caliphs in Tabari’s *Tārīkh* implies that, contrary to the Abbasids, the Umayyads do not share in the pre-Islamic biblical heritage.


V. In the story of his interrogation of Abū Sufyān concerning Muhammad, Heraclius not only plays the role of a latter-day Herod, but also that of an Islamic equivalent to the Three Kings from the East. Herod, a vassal king of the Romans, and Heraclius, a Byzantine emperor, are both kings of the Rūm and rulers over Jerusalem. Heraclius and the Three Kings are all foreign rulers who worship a new Abrahamite prophet when most of his own people still do not recognize him.

VI. Christian typology assumes that Salvation History has a twofold structure, where every event from the New Testament has one double in Old Testament history. Herod is a latter-day Pharaoh and Jesus a latter-day Moses. Medieval Islamic historians expanded this typology not merely into a threefold, but into an almost infinitely repetitive structure: every event from Islamic history has not just one or two, but a much larger amount of doubles. Muhammad and the unbelieving tyrants of his age are the counterparts to a long list of opposing prophets and tyrants.

VII. In his *Tārīkh*, Tabari claims to be interested in the stories that were told by people in the past, rather than in the events of the past. His primary narrator states that his main goal is ‘ilm bi-mākān min akrāb al-madīn (Tab. I, 6). Rosenthal renders *akhrāb* here as ‘history’ and translates: ‘knowledge of the history of men of the past’. This gives the impression that Tabari was primarily interested in the events that befell these men. However, as the context of this passage is one of transmission, *akhrāb* should be rendered as ‘reports’, which results in: ‘knowledge of the reports that were [told by] men of the past.’